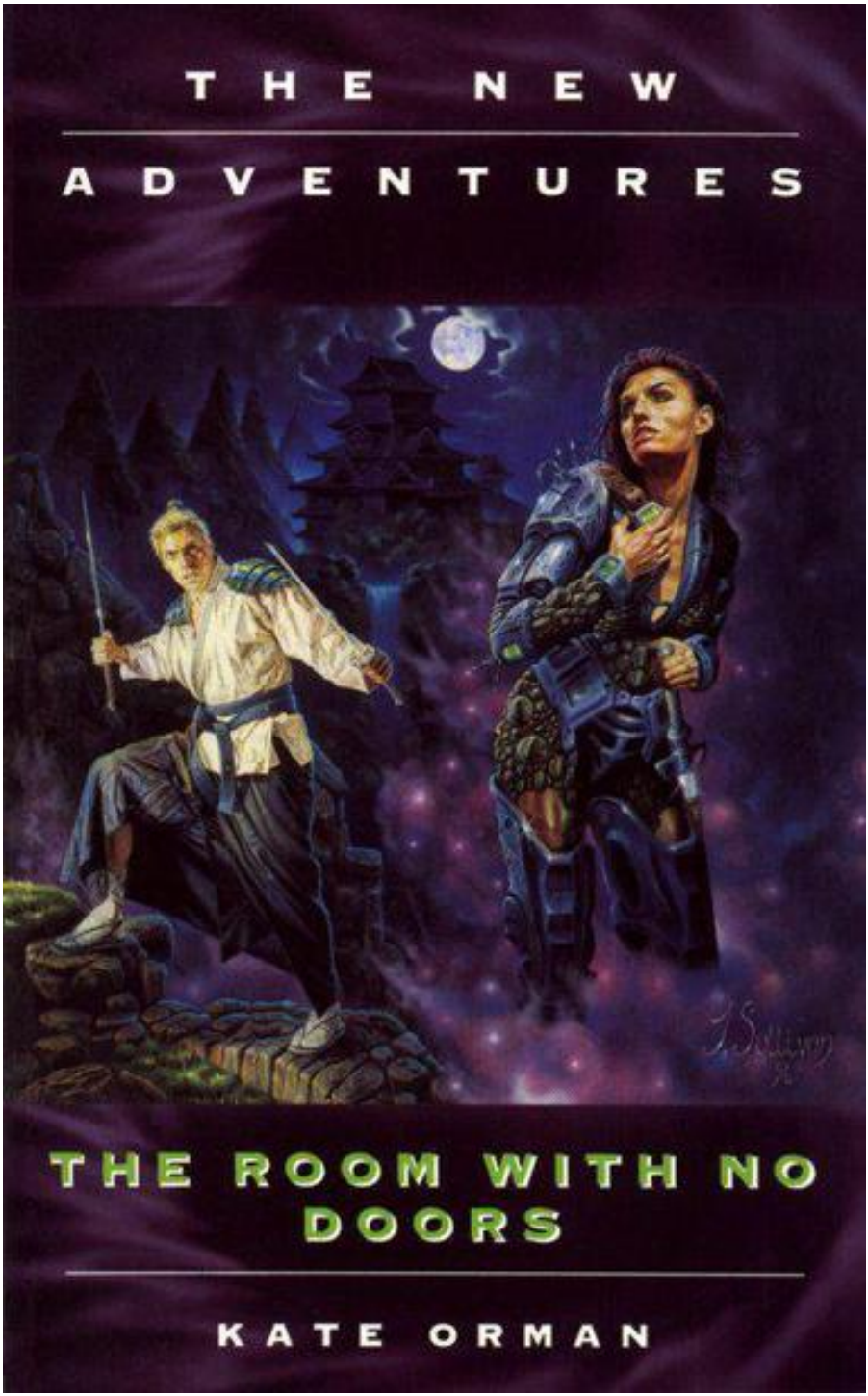
THE NEW

ADVENTURES

THE ROOM WITH NO DOORS

KATE ORMAN



‘DEAR DOCTOR,’ WROTE CHRIS. ‘I GIVE UP.’

Swordplay, samurai, demons, magic, aliens, adventure, excitement. . .

Who needs them?

The Doctor and Chris travel to sixteenth-century Japan, a country gripped by civil war as feudal lords vie for control. Anything could tip the balance of power. So when a god falls out of the sky, everyone wants it.

As villagers are healed and crops grow far too fast, the Doctor and Chris try to find the secret of the miracles – before two rival armies can start a war over who owns the god.

Chris soon finds himself alone – except for an alien slaver, a time-travelling Victorian inventor, a gang of demons, an old friend with suspicious motives, a village full of innocent bystanders, and several thousand samurai.

Without the Doctor, someone has to take up the challenge of adventure and stop the god falling into the wrong hands. Someone has to be a hero – but Chris isn't sure he wants to be hero any more.

KATE ORMAN lives in Sydney, Australia. The Doctor has somehow survived her four previous New Adventures.

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THE ROOM WITH

NO DOORS

Kate Orman

First published in Great Britain in 1997 by

Doctor Who Books

an imprint of Virgin Publishing Ltd

332 Ladbroke Grove

London W10 5AH

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Cover illustration by Jon Sullivan

ISBN 0 426 20500 6

Typeset by Galleon Typesetting, Ipswich

Printed and bound in Great Britain by

Mackays of Chatham PLC

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For the Doctor, and all his travel agents La mort nous parle d'une voix profonde pour ne rien dire.

Death's got a deep voice, but nothing to say.

Paul Valery

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First Slice

The killing sword

En largo camino paja pesa.

On a long journey, even a straw is heavy.

(Spanish proverb)

A better class of portentous dream

Christopher Rodonante Cwej opened his eyes.

He was in the Room With No Doors.

‘Oh no,’ he said. ‘Not again.’

He woke up.

Chris folded his arms behind his head and stared at the ceiling. ‘Whew.’

For a while he just listened to the soft thrumming of the TARDIS, a sound you didn’t hear so much as feel. He reached out a hand and pressed it against the white wall of the room, feeling that deep hum in his fingertips.

The space-time ship must have noticed his movement. Some ripples of light moved across the ceiling, like reflections in fish tank, He smiled. The TARDIS

could be pretty weird, but she took good care of her passengers.

Chris got up and padded across his bedroom. He hadn’t tidied up the place for a while. There were souvenirs and junk from half a dozen planets, some comic books, a bunch of T-shirts and underthings that

needed washing.

He'd been sleeping in his Daffy Duck boxer shorts. Now he tugged on a threadbare dressing gown, and pulled on a sandshoe and had done up the laces before he remembered that he still hadn't found the other one. He took it off, tossed it under the bed and went barefoot into the corridor.

He wondered if the Doctor was asleep. Most nights the Time Lord went into his room and locked the door. Sometimes shouts and even screams came from in there. You got used to it. Chris didn't want to know what the Doctor dreamt about.

It would be nice to go one night without any dreams.

The TARDIS liked to redecorate sometimes, moving the rooms around.

Tonight it put the kitchen across Chris's path. There was a food machine, programmed with about four bazillion recipes. A huge, untidy scrapbook was leaning against it, with the codes for each meal written down in a jumble of Gallifreyan and English and other languages Chris didn't recognize.

There was a twentieth-century fridge, adding an unapologetically low-tech electric hum to the TARDIS's own quiet sound. Chris looked inside and found 3

a fossilised *Archaeopteryx*, a skateboard and a single glass bottle of milk. He peeled back the gold-foil lid and sniffed cautiously. It was fresh. He ate the cream from the top and put a mugful of milk on to warm on the stove.

He paused for a moment, eyes half closed, the taste still in his mouth.

You bastard, *you could have killed me*.

If it hadn't been for Elizabeth Shaw, he wouldn't be here now, breathing, tasting this.

There was a notepad tacked to the wall, with 'mushrooms chickpeas cereal helium' written on it in faded ink. Chris took it down, found a pen in the top drawer, and doodled on the pad while he waited for his milk.

Amongst the squiggles and rocket ships he found himself writing the words

‘Dear Doctor’. He looked at the pad.

‘Dear Doctor,’ he wrote, ‘I give up.’

He scribbled that out and started again: ‘Dear Doctor, these have been some of the best years of my life. Travelling with you has. . . ’ Hell’s bells, the milk!

He snatched the saucepan away from the heat, just in time to prevent one of those gross skins from forming on the top.

‘Can’t sleep?’

Chris nearly spilt the milk.

The Doctor had noiselessly appeared in the doorway of the kitchen. He had dark hair and a lined face and deep blue eyes, and was wearing an oversized orange dressing gown with a little cat embroidered over the breast pocket.

‘You’ve got the right idea,’ said the Tune Lord.

Chris glanced at the notepad on the counter, the saucepan steaming in his hand. ‘Er,’ he said. ‘I have?’

‘Warm milk.’ The Doctor didn’t look as though he’d been sleeping. Maybe he was just wearing the pyjamas for show. ‘Best thing for insomnia.’

‘Do you want some?’ said Chris, immediately wishing he hadn’t. He sort of casually shuffled around until he was between the Doctor and the notepad.

The Time Lord shook his head. ‘I just popped out to check the instruments.

We’ll be landing in about five hours. Get some sleep.’

‘Will do,’ said Chris. ‘Um.’

The Doctor hesitated in the doorway. They looked at one another for a few seconds.

‘You’d better drink that before it gets cold,’ said the Doctor. He smiled at Chris and went back out.

Chris put down the saucepan, ripped the sheet of paper loose from the

notepad, balled it up and stuffed it into his dressinggown pocket.

The Doctor took one more look at the console room. The ship's instruments were flashing and beeping softly to themselves as she drifted through space-4

time. He watched the rhythm for a little while, a moire of light moving over his face, until he was satisfied with the erratic patterns.

He went back to his book-lined study and sat down at the typewriter. A single sheet of paper was protruding from the old machine, like the tip of a white tongue.

He put his hands on the keys, appreciating their mechanical firmness and the soft smell of oil and metal that the machine gave off. He let them rest there, like a concert pianist gathering concentration for the concerto.

Chris took his cocoa for a walk while it cooled. The TARDIS would get him back to his bed when he was ready.

He found himself in the archery range. The straw targets were piled in a corner, the bows and arrows safely stored away in an old trunk. It had been a while since the last lesson.

The Doctor had been teaching him Zen archery for. . . gosh, a couple of years now. *Trying* to teach him, anyway. Chris hadn't got any better at it, missing the target as often as he hit it. But the Doctor said it wasn't a matter of hitting the target so much as *becoming* the target. . . or something. The Doctor knew what he was doing.

Chris sat on the trunk, taking warm mouthfuls of cocoa, looking at the painting that hung on one wall of the long hall. It was a copy of *The Death of Arthur*. The Doctor had done it himself, obviously while he was in a silly mood. James Archer would probably not have been amused by the little Dalek coming out of the lake, or the smiley badge that Merlin was wearing.

This morning the Doctor had been buzzing around the console, in a serious and frowning frame of mind. 'A minor temporal trace,' he had said, 'but one which certainly shouldn't be present in that segment of Earth's history.' His fingers had moved over the controls, urgent, never resting. 'We've got work to do.'

Chris sloshed the grainy stuff at the bottom of his cup around. Another adventure.

He kind of wished they didn't have to go.

The Doctor realized he had been staring at the sheet of paper for fifteen minutes.

'Dear Chris. . . '

He tore the sheet out of the typewriter with a whizzing sound, scrunched it up, and hurled it at the overflowing wastepaper basket.

5

1

How to win

Aoi was still shaking. Thankfully, his father was too interested in the foreigners to notice.

They were kneeling on the grass, their wrists tied behind their backs and their arms tied to their sides. Father's oldest friend Kiiro stood behind them, arms folded. The foreigners' horses were tethered to a nearby pine, beside the three samurai's steeds.

The yellow-headed giant kept his eyes down, but the smaller one was watching the moonrise. As though he wasn't interested, as though he wasn't even here. Perhaps the little man was mad. Who knew how foreigners thought?

Aoi's father stood over them, arms folded. 'You were sent to find the god that fell out of the sky,' said Father.

'Yes,' said the smaller one.

'Tell us everything you know about the matter, and we will let you live.'

'Is that all you want?' The little man laughed. Was he drunk! For a moment, Aoi thought his father would cut the prisoner down then and there.

The giant was watching intently, looking back and forth between Father and the little man, as if he wasn't sure whether to speak. His pale face was splashed with blood. He looked frightened, but the little one just went on watching the moon, unafraid.

Aoi wished he knew how to be unafraid.

That morning the three warriors had ridden over the plains like thunder. Father and Kiiro side by side, Aoi following behind the two older *bushi*, the wind snatching the laughter out of his mouth.

The daimyo's summons had come the night before. Aoi had never met Gufuu Kocho, warlord of the three districts. His father had spent an hour drilling Aoi in protocol before their departure.

Aoi wore his new armour. Two swords hung by his side. The front of his head had been shaved, the rest of his hair gathered up into a warrior's topknot.

7

As of yesterday, when he had come of age, he was a *bushi* in the service of the Gufuu family. Aoi, the fearless and bold samurai, ready to lay down his life in an instant for his master.

After an hour's hard ride they reached the daimyo's castle.

The great

wooden gate towered above them, guards peering down. ' *Kaimon!* ' his father shouted. 'Open the gate!' The trio rode into the courtyard, their banners fluttering hard.

Aoi's heart had been pounding harder than the horses' hooves when they'd gone in to see the daimyo.

The old lord sat on a stool on his *daiza*, magnificent in his armour, his helmet by his side. His hair was white and his dark eyes were sharp as arrows.

The three *bushi* knelt before the raised wooden dais.

Aoi tried to keep his eyes on the floor in front of them, instead of letting them wander around the great, empty room – to the daimyo's personal guard of three ferocious-looking warriors, to the suit of decorated armour in the corner, to the great wooden butterfly carved into the wall above the *daiza*. A page sat beside the warlord, holding his sword. He wasn't much older than Aoi.

The daimyo had returned from a skirmish this morning, and would be riding out again soon. His advisers sat nearby on stools, also in their armour.

‘I have a mission for you,’ said Gufuu. ‘A *kami* has fallen out of the sky in Han district, near the village of Hekison.’

A spirit? A god? The daimyo went on, ‘That territory is disputed. At this time, anything could bring us a tactical advantage. Your task is to find the *kami* and bring it back here before any of my rivals learns of this matter.’

‘ *Hei!* ’ said his father and Kiiro together. Aoi was a moment late in joining their reply.

Aoi felt his father’s attention, even though Father had not turned his head.

The warlord nodded, and his father moved forward a little. ‘My lord,’ he said.

‘My son Aoi turned sixteen yesterday. I would like to ask permission for him to accompany us on this mission.’

The daimyo looked down on Aoi, who had the sudden impression that the old man was sitting on a mountaintop, somewhere high above. Aoi bowed.

‘Very well,’ said the warlord. ‘Now, the border is in turmoil at the moment: beware of enemy troops and spies, brigands, and even armed peasants.’

‘How goes the war, my lord?’ asked Father.

‘The outcome hangs in the balance,’ said Gufuu, honestly. ‘I do not exaggerate when I say anything could affect it, anything could give us the advantage we need. Do not underestimate the possible importance of this mission.’ Aoi’s father bowed.

One of the daimyo’s advisers said, ‘Any battle may be the one that eventually determines who will rule the country. No matter how many warlords vie for power now, in the end one lord must unite the whole land.’

Gufuu said, ‘There is more. I have received word that two men have been sent from Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery to investigate the *kami*.’

‘Monks?’ said Aoi’s father.

‘Not according to the report,’ said the daimyo. ‘Two foreign travellers.’

Father and Kiiro looked at one another. Aoi felt his excitement increase.

First sky spirits, and now foreigners! This was like a story!

‘Your best course of action,’ said the daimyo, ‘may be to intercept these foreigners and find out what they know about the *kami*.’

Father bowed. ‘What do you want us to do with them once we have found and interrogated them?’

‘Whatever they know,’ said the daimyo, ‘kill them.’

Afterwards, when they were arranging their saddlebags for the journey, Father clapped his hand on his son’s shoulder. Aoi smiled at his father. ‘The daimyo thinks you are a fine young man,’ Father said. And I believe that eventually you will surpass me as a *bushi*.’

Aoi bowed to his father. Kiiro laughed, shortly. ‘And Kiiro also,’ said Father, and the pair of them roared with laughter.

They set out that afternoon. The air was crisp and clear, like winter air, though the only snow left was high on the mountains. They had fresh horses, and Father rode hard. Aoi’s *sashimono* fluttered madly behind him, snapping like a flag in the wind.

They didn’t slow down until they came to the banks of a stream. Aoi could see a small village over the water, a little distance away. His father consulted with Kiiro for a few moments.

‘This village is between Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery and Hekison, where the *kami* fell,’ Father said. ‘It’s likely the foreigners stopped here. We’ll soon find out.’

They forded the shallow stream. The villagers had spotted them; women were snatching up children and bundling them away, men were coming out of their crude huts and tiny houses.

For a moment, Aoi saw the *bushi* the way the villagers must see them –

three great figures in armour, astride beautiful horses, banners flapping at their backs. They must look magnificent, and terrifying. Perhaps the villagers thought the war had reached them at last.

The head man received then, as best he could. Aoi knelt uncomfortably on the floor of the cramped house while the old man answered his father's questions.

9

At least it was a house, with wooden walls and floor, and not one of the filthy huts that most of the villagers lived in.

'Yes, they were here, this morning. They bought food from us, and a quiver of arrows. They asked questions.'

'About Hekison?' demanded Father.

'Yes. But we don't know anything about what's happening there.'

Father gazed steadily at the old man. Aoi realized that the wizened fellow was trembling. 'I am telling you the truth, lord. We've heard only that they've placed a new statue in their shrine. That was all we could tell the foreigners.'

'What were the foreigners like?' said Father. 'You sold them arrows. Did they have swords? Muskets?'

'One bore two swords. But they were not warlike, but kindly.'

'Two swords!' exclaimed Aoi. 'The arrogance!'

'Hmm.' Aoi's father thought for a moment. 'They continued on towards Hekison?'

' *Hei, O-samurai.* '

Father stood up. 'We will go now.'

The old man almost fell over with relief. He bowed, over and over, as Kiiro and Aoi got up and followed Father out of the hut.

'We can't waste any more time here,' said his father. 'Let's ride hard for Hekison. If they took the trail, we can overtake them by cutting through the valley.' Kiiro smiled, nodding.

Aoi looked around the village. The peasants were cowering in the doors of their huts, watching the three bold samurai. Aoi swore the foreigners were going to be even more afraid of him.

'Look,' said Kiiro.

They were following a winding trail down the side of a hill. It gave them a good view of the valley. ‘There,’ said Father, putting his hand on Aoi’s shoulder.

Aoi followed his father’s pointing finger. There, between the trees, he caught a flash of movement. ‘We’ll be able to see them more clearly in a moment. Watch.’

Sure enough, the two travellers emerged into a clearing. One was a giant!

He must be more than six feet tall! He was dressed as a *bushi*, as far as Aoi could see, while the other one wore strange clothes and carried a bow.

Kiiro was already nocking an arrow. ‘An easy shot, even from this distance.’

Father shook his head. ‘Do you see that knot of trees beside the path, further along? We’ll ambush them there and challenge them. Try not to kill both of them.’

‘ *Hei!* ’ said Aoi. His heart started to pound again.

* * *

10

They waited in the shadow of the trees. Kiiro gripped his bow, restless. Aoi matched his father’s cool stance, watching the path, leaving his sword in its scabbard.

The two travellers emerged from the trees. Aoi’s hand tightened its hold on the handle of his *katana*.

Both of them were pale-skinned. The giant looked even larger, from this close. Aoi had been right – he was dressed as a samurai; he even carried two swords, though he wore no armour. His hair was the colour of straw.

The smaller man was no warrior – so why was he carrying the bow? Perhaps he was some kind of servant. It probably wasn’t a good idea to make assumptions about foreigners, thought Aoi. Anything could –

Kiiro snapped off a shot. The arrow leapt between the travellers. The small man shouted, and the two of them were suddenly galloping in

opposite directions.

Father and Kiiro raced out of the trees in pursuit. Aoi followed his father, who was chasing the small man back towards the forest. In that tangle of trees, they would quickly catch up with him.

The man urged his horse up a slope. For a moment, Aoi saw his pale face turned back to look at them, and then he disappeared into the trees. Aoi's father drew his *katana*.

The sword was snatched out of his hand, flying back, as though by magic.

Father shouted in surprise.

Aoi leapt down from his horse and ran to pick up his father's sword. The foreigner's arrow was sticking up out of the earth next to it. At any moment, another arrow might fly down, but Aoi pushed that thought away, just snatched up his father's sword and threw it to him with a wordless shout.

'Get behind him!' his father roared. Aoi vaulted back on to his horse and rode into the forest.

It took only a minute to ride right around the hill. Aoi leapt down from the steed and ran up the slope, trampling pale spring flowers, drawing his sword.

He heard the unmistakable thwack of an arrow being loosed, and his heart convulsed in his chest. If that *gaijin* had slain his father. . .

He could see the stranger. The man let fly another arrow, then jumped down from his horse and slapped its flank. The horse cantered off through the trees to the left.

From his vantage point above the stranger, Aoi could see his father, bending to snatch up his sword again. He ran, holding the weapon, following the horse – it was a decoy!

If the traveller was such a good shot, why didn't he slay his opponent?

Aoi stepped out from behind the tree. ' *Gaijin-san!* ' he shouted.

The man whirled. Aoi came down the slope, carefully, feet slipping in the wet grass. 'Draw your sword!' he shouted.

‘I don’t have a sword,’ the man pointed out.

‘Then surrender,’ demanded Aoi.

‘All right then,’ said the man. He carefully leant his bow against a tree.

Aoi came towards him, keeping his sword handy. ‘I am Itachi Aoi,’ he said.

‘Call me Isha,’ said the little man.

Now that Aoi was closer, he could see just how strange this ‘Doctor’ looked.

The skin as pale as a woman’s, the oddly textured clothes, the strange eyes. It was as though he was some kind of *kami* instead of a human being. His eyes especially. They were the colour of the sky, or of the ocean on a stormy day, or perhaps they were the colour of –

Aoi realized that the man’s fingers had gently closed over his sword hand.

He snatched his hand out of the demon’s grasp, and raised his sword for a killing strike.

The man blocked Aoi’s wrist with the back of his hand, his fingers twisting to catch and pull the samurai’s sword arm down. The *katana* slapped against the little man’s leg and sprang out of Aoi’s grip.

The next thing Aoi knew, he was lying amid the flowers. He rolled over, frantic. His father would return at any moment.

The *katana* was sticking up out of the ground. The man drew it out and ran a fingernail down its edge, admiring the metal.

‘Kill me,’ said Aoi.

The man looked down at him. ‘There is such a thing as the Hippocratic Oath, you know,’ he said.

‘Please,’ said Aoi. A terrible cold calm had taken hold of him. He knew just the right thing to do. ‘You’ve defeated me fairly, honourable opponent. Finish it.’

The man said, ‘You can’t be older than sixteen, why don’t –’

Aoi had snatched out his *wakizashi*. The man froze in place, staring at the short sword. ‘There’s no need to do that,’ he said.

Aoi unbuckled his armour, one-handed, frantic, exposing his chest and belly.

The man stood very still, holding the *katana*, not daring to move.

Aoi turned the blade in his hand.

The man knelt down, suddenly, and put the *katana* on the grass.

Aoi stared at it. The little man bowed to him. ‘The victory is yours, honourable opponent,’ he said, calmly.

Aoi didn’t understand. He saw his hand reach out, felt his fingers close around the hilt of his *katana*.

‘Son!’

He looked up. His father stood across the clearing.

12

Aoi leapt to his feet, holding both weapons, his armour in disarray.

‘Well done!’ said his father. He strode across the clearing, glanced down at the little man, and looked at both swords. ‘Well done indeed. There’s no greater victory than one without bloodshed.’

Kiiro had defeated the other traveller after quite a fight, while Aoi and his anx-ious captive watched. Kiiro bound the giant and dragged him before Father, pushing him on to his knees.

The sun was going down. Aoi was given the job of collecting fallen wood from the darkening forest. Kiiro stood guard over the prisoners. Once, when the little man started to speak to his giant companion, he roared for them to be silent, and Aoi felt himself flinch as though someone had struck him.

Aoi’s father waited until the fire was lit before he interrogated the prisoners.

He stood over them in his armour, hand on the hilt of his sword. They did not tremble or beg. Aoi wished he had the secret of their courage.

‘Tell me what you know of the spirit that fell from the sky,’ said

Father. ‘I will not ask again.’

‘All right,’ said the giant. ‘No problem, we’ll tell you whatever you want to know.’ The little man glanced up at him. ‘Do you want to –’

‘You start,’ said the man. He looked back at Aoi, who shuddered at the touch of those blue eyes, and remained silent.

The giant took a breath, and started to tell their story.

13

2

Blue-eyed samurai

Chris was looking at a flower.

The single blossom was blushing pink. It was at eye-level, six feet up the wall, peeking out between two stones.

His muscular frame was hidden inside the loose trousers and jacket he was wearing, blue cloth with gold patterns over a black kimono. His blond hair was done up in a samurai topknot.

He took a step back and looked up. The wall was a seamless mass, thousands of stones piled high, as though a giant eggshell had been glued back together. Here and there moss was growing, there and here more of the tiny pink flowers had taken root.

‘How long has it been since anyone lived here?’ The question turned into a puff of white in the chilly air.

He turned around. The Doctor was looking up at the Castle itself. He didn’t answer for a moment.

With his stature and his yellow hair, Chris wasn’t very heavily disguised by his samurai clothes. The Doctor hadn’t even bothered to dress like a local, wearing a dark Paisley waistcoat and a tweed jacket, his umbrella hooked over one arm, a banged-up leather satchel slung over the opposite shoulder.

But then, the Doctor always seemed to get away with it. After all, he was already incognito. There was no way to tell by looking that he wasn’t human.

He turned to Chris and smiled. ‘No one’s been here for ten years,’ he

said,

‘except for whoever carved that.’

He pointed with his umbrella at a single stone, standing by itself in front of the Castle. Chris saw that the surface was partly carved, with a human figure he couldn’t quite make out.

The Castle was a charred mass of timber, its lines softened by seasons of snow and rain. The top storeys had collapsed through one another, falling down into the centre. The ornamental ponds were empty but for a chill slick of algae. The trees were tired collections of sticks.

15

‘A shrine,’ said the Doctor, examining the stone. ‘A very basic one, but I expect it serves its purpose.’

‘What purpose?’

‘In this case, to shut in an angry spirit. Usually the shrines are small buildings, and the spirit is trapped inside, unable to hurt the living.’

‘What happened here?’ said Chris.

The Doctor said nothing, hands clasped behind his back, walking around the Castle as though it was a mildly interesting work of art.

Chris walked in the other direction, following the wall. There was no sign of a breach. There were no bodies or scattered pieces of armour, none of the paraphernalia of war. Maybe the Castle had just caught fire, and had been abandoned by a daimyo too poor to rebuild it.

There was a wooden ladder leaning against the wall. Chris tested a couple of rungs. The wood was still hard, after all these years. He climbed up carefully.

Wow, the view! It was just dawn, the horizon still a line of pink and orange.

Chris stood on top of the wall, breathing in deep lungfuls of the cold air. The Castle was high in the mountains. Jagged cliffs fell away to broad plains.

Distant peaks held lingering snow. He thought he could make out a town, a dark patch on the plain below.

In his time, the cities were a thick film that covered the Earth, even the oceans. No matter where you were, the air carried the same smell of industry and sweat. Years in his past, centuries into the future.

Chris turned to look down into the Castle grounds. You'd have to be out of your mind to haul yourself up to the top of the mountain and attack the place. Besides, the wall was undamaged. The fire must have been accidental.

A serious danger for the wooden buildings with their paper doors.

Behind the ruined building, he could see the TARDIS, a blue oblong standing between the barren trees. It was a long time since Chris had thought about how weird it was that all those hallways and rooms could fit inside that little box. The Doctor stopped beside his space-time machine and gave it a gentle pat. He was carrying something.

Chris climbed back down the ladder, sandals slipping a little on the rungs.

He wondered if he could hide some proper boots under the baggy trousers.

The Doctor was waiting for him at the bottom of the ladder, holding a lacquered bamboo bow taller than he was.

'It looks so peaceful,' said Chris.

'It isn't,' said the Doctor. 'We've arrived smack in the middle of *sengoku jidai*, the Age of the Warring States. More than half a century of constant warfare.

The Shogunate is collapsing, the land is in fragments. Rival feudal lords are fighting tooth and nail for power.'

'Oh yeah,' said Chris. 'And under feudalism –'

'– it's your count that votes.' The Doctor handed the bow to Chris. It ought to be splintered and rotting, but it was still whole. Chris raised it and plucked the string, experimentally, listening to the deep thwack and the echoes that followed. Even the string was still good.

'So have you been here before?' said Chris.

'Yes.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out an eggshaped thing

the size of his fist, made out of something that wasn't glass. A rainbow slick of colours moved across its surface, flaring to white where the little man's fingers touched it. 'I had thought perhaps the temporal distortion was coming from here.'

Chris said, 'Time isn't quite right here, is it?'

Without warning, the Doctor tossed the egg at him. Chris snatched it out of the air without thinking.

He looked at the oval shape in his palm. It fizzed like sherbet where it touched his skin. 'No,' said the Doctor, 'hold it with just your fingertips.'

Chris gingerly corrected his grip. Now the tingling was all in the concentration of nerve endings in his fingers. The colours swirled down as though to touch him, bleeding into white against his skin.

'What do you feel?' said the Doctor.

'It's like putting a battery on your tongue,' said Chris.

'Try closing your eyes.'

Chris did as he was told. 'Oh,' he said. 'Time isn't moving normally here.

It's as though there's some sort of shadow. . . but it's left behind from a long time ago. There's something. . . newer and stronger. Somewhere close by.'

He opened his eyes. The Doctor was smiling at him, pleased.

Chris grinned and tossed the egg at him with a flick of his wrist. The Doctor yelped and grabbed at it.

'Somewhere below us, I think,' said Chris. 'Down the mountainside.' He turned to go back to the TARDIS.

The Doctor tucked the egg back into his jacket pocket. 'A walk in the fresh air will do us good.' He pointed his umbrella tip at the gate.

Chris hesitated by the wall, where the flower was growing, a pink eye staring out at them. He caught the faint tang of its perfume as he reached out to pick it.

The Doctor's hand was suddenly on his arm. 'Don't,' he said.

Chris took a step back. ‘Why?’

‘It’s probably poisonous. This was never a healthy place.’

Chris followed the Doctor down the mountainside. The Time Lord followed a path that wasn’t there, effortlessly negotiating boulders and fallen trees.

17

How long had they been travelling together? It was easy to lose track of time when one day didn’t follow another. Chris knew he was somewhere around twenty-six. The Doctor was at least one thousand and three years old.

Chris smiled to himself, remembering that last birthday party. It was very difficult to surprise the Doctor, but Benny had managed it, quietly setting things up in a secluded room in the TARDIS and swearing Chris and Roz to secrecy. The astonished grin on the Time Lord’s face had been worth those weeks of desperately trying not to give the game away.

The TARDIS, was so quiet, now that he was its only passenger. They still dropped in on Benny from time to time, and the Doctor had a millennium’s worth of friends to visit. . . But it was just Chris and the Doctor now. Archery lessons and cookery lessons and long chats about anything and everything.

The Doctor and Chris, adventuring through space and time, stopping here and there to save the universe.

Chris felt his smile fade away, remembering last night’s half-written note.

The Doctor leant against a tree, waiting for his companion to catch him up.

“There’s a monastery at the base of the mountain,’ he said. ‘We should be able to stay, briefly, while we track down the temporal distortion.’

‘Hey, great, maybe I can get some tips on my shooting.’ Chris mimed drawing a bow.

The Doctor scowled. ‘Zen archery isn’t a matter of technique, I’m always telling you. . . ’

‘I know, I was joking. How long do you reckon we’ll be here?’

‘Objectively or subjectively?’

‘Subjectively.’

‘You know,’ said the Doctor, ‘when we get to the monastery, you must talk to the Roshi, the old master, about subjectivity. He’ll tell you one of those marvellous little Zen stories. Once upon a time, two monks called Tanzan and Ekido encountered a young woman in a silk kimono, who couldn’t get across a muddy road. . . ’

Whenever Chris lived through a fifth of September, he just counted it as another birthday. He’d had five in the last two years. He suspected that the Doctor tried to land in September whenever he thought Chris needed cheering up.

The Doctor was still telling his story. ‘Tanzan picked the woman up in his arms and carried her over the muddy road.’

Roz Forrester, of course, had been rather annoyed by all the parties, but she always came along anyway, usually to get brain-stompingly drunk.

‘Ekido was puzzled, but he didn’t say anything until that evening, back at the monastery. “You know monks don’t go near women!” he said. “Why did you do that?”’

If Roz was here now, Chris supposed, she would say she was the oldest one out of the three of them. And the Doctor would point out his several centuries of seniority, and Roz would say that she was dead and you can’t get any older.

‘And Tanzan said, “I left the girl there. Are you still carrying her?”’

Chris looked at the Doctor, who was leaning against a tree, gazing down the hill.

There was a real path there, widening at one point to accommodate a small shrine – like the one near the Castle: a rock with a small carving. Someone was standing before it, a figure in a robe and a broad hat that hid his head and shoulders.

‘A travelling monk,’ said the Doctor.

‘Heading for the monastery?’

The Doctor made his way down the steep slope, using tree trunks and limbs for support. Chris followed, carefully. The figure didn’t look up until they reached the road.

It was a short, elderly man, with sharp eyes but a friendly smile. He held a fallen tree branch in one hand, leaning on his improvised walking stick.

‘ *Hajimemashite*,’ said the Doctor, with a bow. ‘Are you headed for Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery?’

The man nodded. ‘Please accompany me,’ he said, ‘and I’ll show you the way.’

The pilgrim didn’t say anything for another half an hour. Despite his age, he walked down the mountain as though he was taking a stroll around a garden.

‘Tell me,’ he said suddenly, startling Chris, ‘tell me about yourself.’

When the Doctor didn’t reply, Chris realized the monk was talking to him.

Here we go, he thought. ‘My family were Dutch. I was brought up by a samurai family after being orphaned in a shipwreck.’

The monk didn’t look around. ‘Now tell me who you really are.’

Chris glanced at the Doctor, who nodded slightly. Chris took a deep breath.

‘Actually I was born about fourteen hundred years from now. I was – I’m an Adjudicator, a sort of policeman.’

The monk nodded. ‘Why did you give up your profession to follow the Doctor?’

‘I didn’t have any choice,’ said Chris. ‘Me and my partner Roz, we discovered a huge conspiracy among the Adjudicators. They’d have killed us if we hadn’t gone.’

‘I see,’ said the monk. ‘Now tell me who you truly are.’

‘Sorry?’

‘For example,’ said the monk, ‘let me tell you a story.’ The Doctor gave Chris an I-told-you-so smile. ‘You’ll like it, it’s about a pupil who was teasing his 19

master, Kosen, a great calligrapher. Kosen was preparing some words for a temple carving. He took up his ink brush and wrote “The First Principle”. His pupil, who was always criticizing him, said, “That’s no good!” So Kosen tried again, and again, but each time the pupil had some criticism of his calligraphy.

‘Finally, the pupil stepped outside for a moment, and Kosen snatched up the paper and quickly wrote “The First Principle”. When the pupil returned, he exclaimed, “A masterpiece!”’

‘Why?’ said Chris.

‘That is the question,’ said the old man. ‘Why?’

Chris thought, but nothing came out. The Doctor grinned. ‘As I recall,’ said the monk, ‘you haven’t given me a satisfactory answer to that question either.’

The Doctor’s grin changed to an embarrassed smile.

‘Speaking if conspiracies. . . ’ said Chris, putting his hands on his hips and looking between the two of them.

It was a conspiracy all right, thought Chris, as he swept the steps of the meditation hall.

The monastery was a small collection of low buildings, surrounded by an earth embankment that looked like it could keep out an army. Monks were hard at work everywhere, hoeing the garden, hanging out washing. It was midday, and the air just starting to get warmer.

Almost as soon as they’d arrived, he’d been handed a broom and sent out to sweep the steps. The Doctor and Kadoguchi-roshi, who, surprise surprise, had turned out to be the chief monk, had disappeared into one of the other buildings, chatting.

He realized with a start that the slender monk sharing the sweeping was actually a nun. She worked silently, with the hint of a smile on her face. He wondered if it would be good manners to talk to her.

She had carefully swept away the last of the dust before she spoke. There was something about her movements, simple and graceful, as

though sweeping was an art form and she was an expert. ‘My name is Chiyono,’ she said.

‘What’s yours?’

‘Chris,’ he said. She was in her thirties, he guessed. Her eyes were deep and dark.

‘I saw you come in with Yukidaruma-san,’ she said. Chris laughed out loud, and glanced around in embarrassment. But the monks weren’t paying him any more attention than before.

The nun was smiling at him. ‘“Mr Snowman”?’ he said.

‘Kadoguchi-roshi found him in the snow,’ said Chiyono„ so we called him Snowman. Are you in his service?’

‘Sort of,’ said Chris. ‘Yeah, I guess I am.’

20

Chiyono grimaced suddenly, leaning hard on her broom as though it was a walking stick. Chris put out a hand to steady her. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Yes,’ she said, after a moment.

‘No,’ said Chris, ‘I mean, really all right.’

She looked at him with those dark eyes. ‘I am dying,’ she said.

Chris opened his mouth and closed it again.

: What are you thinking, Kuriisu-san?’

I was thinking,’ he ventured, ‘that if I was dying, I wouldn’t waste my time sweeping.’

‘What would you do?’

Chris thought about it. ‘What I’m doing now, I guess. Go on travelling with the Doctor, and see as much of the universe as I could.’

The nun smiled. It was so beautiful it froze his mind. ‘The further you travel,’ she said, ‘the less you know.’

A bell sounded. The deep booming ring echoed out through the still

air of the valley, each note blending completely into the sounds of tree and wind and water before another was struck.

Still smiling, Chiyono picked up her broom and walked away.

Chris didn't even notice the Doctor until the small man nudged him in the elbow.

'Everything's arranged,' said the Doctor. 'We're welcome here, and, better still, Kadoguchi-roshi thinks he's got some information about the source of the temporal distortion.'

'Oh good,' said Chris. 'I think I'm in love with a nun.'

'Swept off your feet?' Chris pulled a face. 'And while you were out here, I was put to work in the kitchen! Come on, that bell's for the mid-morning meal.'

Much later.

The Doctor and Kadoguchi-roshi sat together in the old Zen Master's room.

The Doctor had sent Chris off to get them some horses; they'd continue their investigations in the morning.

The Time Lord poured green tea into the Roshi's small cup. The tea set was hundreds of years old, beautiful, simple pieces of glazed pottery.

'Why have you come here?'

The Doctor smiled. 'The roses blooming on Mount Cadon,' he said.

The Roshi returned his smile. 'This isn't a formal interview, Doctor.'

'I didn't want to risk a knock over the head!'

'I rely rather less on the stick than my predecessor. There are less violent ways of startling the mind into awakening.' The old teacher took a sip of tea.

'We must do this properly tomorrow.'

21

'Yes, please,' said the Doctor. 'Your tea room is one of the calmest places in the universe. I carry it around with me in case of

emergencies.' He tapped himself absently on the back of the head. 'But to answer your question, I'm here because I detected a minor temporal distortion somewhere in this area.'

He took the rainbow egg out of his pocket.

The Roshi glanced at the bit of technology. 'Now tell me why you're really here.'

'This is why I'm here,' said the Doctor, surprised. 'There really is a temporal distortion.'

The Roshi gazed at him.

'This terrible waiting,' whispered the Doctor.

The Roshi poured him a cup of tea, pushing it towards him.

'Do you remember why I couldn't defeat the *jiki-ketsu-gaki*?' said the Doctor at length, tucking the detector back in his pocket.

'You were afraid she would kill you.'

'She had to be stopped, and I was the only one who could do it.' The Doctor turned the cup around in his hands. 'Everything was going so well until I realized what it would really take.'

'And so you hesitated.'

'In a sense.' The Doctor laughed. 'I climbed out through a window and bolted.'

'You might have died if you'd stayed.'

'I would have died if you hadn't pulled me out of the snow. Eighteen people died because I climbed out of that castle window. Killed because I didn't finish the job. I can't afford to hesitate. I don't have the luxury.'

The tea cup made a sound like shattering glass as it struck the floor. The Doctor looked at the broken pieces, appalled.

'Why are you here?' said Kadoguchi-roshi.

The Doctor breathed out a sigh. 'Chris,' he said.

The old man bent and gathered up the pieces of the cup he had

dashed to the floor. The Doctor watched him, frowning.

Chiyono took Chris shopping. It took them an hour to walk down to the town.

'OK,' he said, as they trudged along the muddy road, maybe you can give me a hint.'

'A hint?'

'I'm trying to work out this riddle that Kadoguchi-roshi gave me.'

' *A koan,* ' said Chiyono.

'Yeah. Listen: there was this guy called Kosen, and – oh, you've heard it.'

Chiyono was nodding. 'What do you think the answer is?'

'I don't know, but I think it's got something to do with reincarnation or something. Am I on the right track?'

'This is the road that leads to town,' said Chiyono.

'Argh,' said Chris.

'Kuriisu-san,' said Chiyono, 'I can't help you with the *koan. You* have to penetrate its meaning by yourself.'

'Oh come on, couldn't you just sort of nudge me in the right direction?'

'No one can,' said Chiyono. 'You could read all the scriptures, listen to endless lectures, and be able to speak eloquently on Zen, and the plum blossoms would still understand the truth better than you.'

Chris booted a stone. 'That's what the Doctor's always saying. You can't be told, you just have to understand.'

'The Tao that can be spoken is not the eternal Tao.'

They got more than a few strange looks in the town. The Doctor had produced a bag of coins from his capacious pockets, and sent Chris to buy them a pair of horses.

Chris wanted to add to his samurai gear. The samurai armour was neat, made out of strips of metal, light and flexible. One of those ferocious face masks would be cool, too. The only problem would be finding a suit of armour that fitted. . .

'Is everyone from the future as tall as you?' the nun teased him.

'No,' said Chris. 'Depends on where people come from and what they eat.

Hey, how did you know –'

'I watched over Snowman-san in the infirmary,' she said. 'We were always getting into trouble for chattering. Tell me a little bit about your travels.'

'Yeah. Well. . . ' Chris realized he wasn't walking any more, standing beside the town well, suddenly feeling too tired to move.

The nun waited.

'We lost a friend,' said Chris. 'The Doctor had known her for years.' The nun looked at him, silently. 'It's OK,' he said. 'You can ask me about it if you want.'

Chiyono sat down on the edge of the well. She touched his arm, and he sat down beside her. 'How did she die?'

'Like a hero,' he said. 'It's a long story, but. . . we were both poisoned, and there was only enough antidote for one of us. She insisted I take it.'

'Oh, Kuriisu-san. What a terrible way to lose someone.'

'Yeah. Well.'

'She must have loved you very much.'

Chris looked down at the nun, and suddenly there was such a painful lump in his throat he could hardly breathe. Chiyono watched him, waiting. 'I 23

don't think so. . . ' he managed eventually. 'It was just that she was really old, and. . . ' He shook his head.

'You may also ask me about it,' said Chiyono.

Chris looked at her with his sad blue eyes. ‘Where do we go when we die?’

Chiyono looked at him, considering. ‘What do you believe?’

‘Adjudicators believe in the Goddess,’ said Chris. ‘Justice. She makes sure that everyone gets what they deserve, even if it’s only after they die.’

‘But you don’t feel sure of that.’

Chris shrugged. ‘It must happen after we die,’ he said. ‘Hardly anybody gets what they deserve in this world. What do you think?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Chiyono. ‘I haven’t died yet.’

Dinner was rice gruel and pickled vegetables. Chris wondered if he should have smuggled a stash of chocolate bars in.

The monks ate in silence, after chanting and prayers. The Doctor had borrowed a couple of wooden bowls. He didn’t seem to mind the food, wordlessly showing Chris how to wield his chopsticks.

Chris expected to be sent back out to sweep again, but the Doctor took his sleeve. ‘The Roshi’s waiting for us,’ he murmured, as the monks filed out of the hall.

The old monk was in his room, kneeling on a *tatami*. A young monk was kneeling before him on another of the straw mats. The Doctor, of course, found it easy to sit Japanese style. Chris knelt awkwardly, towering over the other three.

‘This is Dengon,’ said the Roshi. ‘Two days ago I asked him to investigate certain rumours about a village in the valley. He’s come back from Hekison with some interesting news.

The monk said, ‘According to the villagers, one month ago, a god fell out of the sky.’

‘Ahhh. . . ’ said Chris.

‘The god landed in a rice field, and was taken back to the village, where it was placed in a shrine. Since then it has been performing miracles.’

There was a long moment of silence. Chris realized he was waiting for the Doctor to start asking questions, but the Time Lord was watching

him, patiently. ‘What, what kind of miracles?’ he said.

‘The villagers say it has been making their crops grow, healing people, and protecting them from bandits and passing armies.’

‘Nothing more impressive.

‘No, Isha-sama.’

‘Meteorite,’ said Chris.

‘Could be,’ said the Doctor, tapping his fingers against his chin.

24

Chris thought fast. ‘Or a bit of passing space junk. It isn’t radioactive,’ he added, ‘not if – there haven’t been any deaths?’

‘No, Kuriisu-san,’ said the monk.

The Doctor took the rainbow egg out of his pocket. ‘Could you hold this for me, please?’

The monk looked at the ovoid curiously. The Doctor put it into his palm, and soft blue lines appeared in the colour, stretching away from the young man’s fingers and crisscrossing the egg.

The Doctor nodded. ‘You’ve been in contact with a minor temporal anomaly sometime in the last thirty-six hours,’ he diagnosed. ‘This is excellent. You know, Chris, if this is a natural phenomenon, we could have this sorted out by teatime tomorrow.’

They both started laughing. Kadoguchi-roshi and the young monk looked at them, puzzled.

The Doctor took out his pocket watch and glanced at it. ‘Do we have enough time for a tea ceremony tonight?’ he asked.

Kadoguchi-roshi smiled. ‘The more quickly it’s done, the longer it takes. I don’t think you’re quite ready.’

‘That’s the nub of my problem,’ said the Doctor. They were walking through the garden, through the sound of distant chanting and the wind in the bamboo. There was a milk-coloured moon overhead, providing enough light to see by. ‘I’m not ready. I want to be ready.’

‘You speak as though you know the hour and the place.’

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘But I want to. I want to choose. If I’ve got to regenerate again, go through that miniature death one more time, I want it to be on my own terms.’

‘You want it to mean something.’

‘Yes,’ said the Doctor. ‘Everything I do is for a purpose. Too many people just die, die for no reason.’ The Roshi said nothing, considering a leafless tree.

‘I have to admit there’s something a little bit attractive about the prospect.

Passing the baton. Putting down all the burdens and letting it all be washed away. . . ’ The Doctor shook himself. ‘Time won’t have her Champion for much longer. Chris has to be ready. Recent events have shaken him badly.’

‘You can reach Hekison village within a day,’ said the Roshi. ‘Be careful of brigands and wolves.’

‘We’ll stay until tomorrow morning. And we’ll be back within a day or so.’

The Roshi nodded. ‘Perhaps you will be ready by then.’ The Doctor gave him a troubled look as he walked on.

* * *

25

Chris was sitting in the travellers’ quarters, struggling to undo his samurai topknot, and thinking about a dream he’d once had. He’d seen that girl with the face of a clock once before, in another one of *those* dreams. ‘Is this your new steward?’ she had asked the Doctor. ‘Or have you brought me a sacrifice?’

It was like a riddle he’d been given to solve. He was kind of the Doctor’s steward now, or really his squire, the way he had been Roz’s squire. Like an apprentice. But a sacrifice?

If the Doctor asked him to die, would he do it?

Risking your life was one thing, but knowing you were going to die, knowing there was no escape. . . ‘Make it quick,’ Liz had told him, and he hadn’t been able to do it, hadn’t been able to spare her those slow

hours of *knowing*.

For Chiyono, it had already been years. How could she bear it?

What was more creepy was the idea that the Doctor wouldn't trust him to be brave enough. Maybe he would even trick him into dying. If it was the right thing to do.

Chris wished he was more like the Doctor. He knew the Time Lord wouldn't hesitate, didn't have doubts. At least, very few.

On the other hand, always knowing the right thing to do even if it meant getting your friends killed – must really suck.

Should he ask the Doctor about the dream, the new dream, his night-after-nightmare? He had a weird feeling the Time Lord already knew about it.

Anyway, the Doctor liked him to figure things out for himself. Like what had happened to the Castle.

Chris looked up. Kadoguchi-roshi was there, holding a sputtering lamp.

The old man sat down in front of him, putting the lamp between them. His wrinkled face looked weird in the flickering light.

'Kosen was really the pupil, and the other guy was the teacher. Right?'

The Roshi just smiled. Darn, thought Chris.

'Do you know why we call him Snowman?' asked the old monk. Chris shook his head.

'Then let me tell you another story. It was ten years ago, in the middle of a very bitter winter. I had travelled over the mountain to visit another monastery, and I was returning. I had stopped at the shrine to Jizo Bosatsu on the mountainside – where you met me – when I saw a hand push its way out of the snow.'

Chris listened, pulling at his hair.

'I was more easily surprised in those days,' said the Roshi. 'I was quite startled to see a hand creeping out from under the snow like a pale spider. I went at once to fetch a branch and dig out the poor buried unfortunate.

‘It appeared that he had been trying to climb out of a ditch when exhaustion overcame him. But he was lucky.’

26

Chris said, ‘The snow insulates you.’

The Roshi nodded. ‘Without that white cloak, he would certainly have frozen to death. I dug him out of the snow and carried him down the mountainside on my back.

‘The chief monk examined him, and we found the signs of the *jiki-ketsu-gaki* on his throat and wrists. At that time she was a great danger to those passing through the mountains. I had taken special care to avoid her Castle.’

‘The Castle we landed in.’ Chris thought of the humanoid figure carved into the shrine stone, the face he hadn’t been able to make out. He imagined the monks hastily making the shrine, eager to leave. . .

The Roshi said, ‘No one expected him to live. But I knew that someone who had survived the *jiki-ketsu-gaki* and the snow would not easily relinquish life.

I placed him next to the fire in the infirmary and watched over him until he recovered.

‘He stayed with us for three months. He lived like a monk, cooking and working and attending sermons.’

Chris grinned suddenly. ‘Did he shave his head?’

‘No. He’d never have the patience to become a monk. His mind is in a hundred places at once. Every day he looked up into the mountains, towards the demon’s Castle. He was like a ghost that could not rest until it had finished a task.’

Chris realized that his topknot had come undone by itself while he was listening. He shook his head, letting his yellow hair fall down to his shoulders, and took out his comb.

‘I’ve heard the story of the snowman and the hungry ghost,’ said Aoi. ‘So you were the one who destroyed her!’

The man smiled. ‘Second time lucky.’

‘Enough,’ said Aoi’s father. ‘Wandering monks and pilgrims bring the

Roshi news from all around. He must have told you more about the fallen god. Tell me what you know.'

'My nose itches,' said the little man. Aoi's father raised an arm to strike him, almost casually.

'Yes, he did,' said the giant quickly. 'Though he didn't tell us very much.'

Kiiro had discovered the Doctor's jacket pockets. He began to empty them, strange objects tumbling out on to the grass. Pieces of string and strange coins and toys. And there was the rainbow-coloured egg. Aoi reached out for it and held it in his palm. The snowman watched him as he marvelled at the pattern of colours swirling over its surface.

Aoi's father said, 'Tell me, then, whatever he told you.' The yellow-haired *bushi* nodded.

27

'My nose still itches,' said the snowman.

28

The Room With No Doors

Chris opened his eyes. He was in the Room With No Doors.

He sat up.

It was just the same as the last. . . how many times? There was nothing else in the room but him. No bed, no table, no chair.

He drew his knees up to his chest, sitting back against one of the walls.

He could see, even though there was no particular place the light was coming from.

He'd explored the room, of course. There had been plenty of time in those endless, vaguely panicked nights. Six walls, smoothly joined at the edges. A high ceiling, out of reach. The air was neither warm nor cool. The floor was hard, but not particularly hard, just not soft. Made of the same impenetrable stuff as the walls.

The first time he'd had this nightmare, it had gone on for hours. Eight hours – he'd checked the alarm clock next to his bed. That was how it

always went, hour after hour of sitting in the Room, unable to wake up. Each time he wondered if he ought to ask the Doctor about it. Each time, for some reason, he didn't.

He wished he could dream up a comic book or something.

Imagine being stuck somewhere like this. Being a prisoner or something, in solitary. Absolute solitary. No little slot where the food came in. Nothing.

Man, that was creepy. Chris hugged his knees. Imagine being stuck here forever. Oh, man.

Oh, of course! That was where this came from, of course! His grandfather's funeral. He laughed out loud. It was so simple.

Poor old Granddad. Chris had been only five when he'd died. Poor old loony Granddad, everyone in the extended Cwej clan pitching in to help look after him and chase the space lobsters out of his beard. He'd driven them to their wits' end, but they'd loved him. Chris's father had insisted on a traditional funeral, open coffin and everything.

Chris had a vague memory of being carried out of the funeral home by his mother, crying, because he didn't want Granddad to be shut up in that box 29

forever.

He had been much older when he realized that the coffin would have been vaporized after the service. There was no room left on Earth for the dead.

Chris shrugged his shoulders, leaning back against the wall. 'That's all it is,'

he told the nightmare, his voice echoing. 'A childhood scare. Do your worst.'

He didn't wake up for five hours.

30

3

How to lose

Someone shook Chris. He opened one eye. The Doctor was standing

over him, holding a lamp.

‘Time to go, I think,’ said the Time Lord.

Chris sat up. ‘It’s the middle of the night,’ he protested. The Doctor looked vaguely agitated, but didn’t say anything. ‘Is something wrong?’

‘I hate goodbyes,’ whispered the Doctor. ‘And I want to get an early start.’

Chris groaned theatrically. ‘Well, couldn’t you start without me?’

The Doctor looked at him, sharply, the lamp flame reflected, jumping, in his eyes. ‘I’d rather not,’ he said, very softly. ‘There may not be much time.’

‘Something is wrong,’ said Chris, scrambling out of bed. But the Doctor had already turned and gone out of the room.

Chris frowned. It wasn’t fair dragging him out of bed and then not telling him what the problem was. Unless the Doctor was just being weird – to keep his companion interested?

Chris had the sudden, wild idea of getting back under the covers. He didn’t want an adventure. Let the Doctor go off and fool around with the time distortion. He’d stay here, nice and warm and actually safe for once, and get –

– a few more hours’ sleep.

Chris groaned and reached for his kimono.

The Doctor patted his horse reassuringly on the neck. He led it through the blackness towards the exit, motioning for Chris to do the same, and stepped on the man sleeping in front of the gate.

The Roshi looked up at them. He was curled in a pile of straw. ‘Oh, I beg your pardon,’ he said with a polite smile.

The Doctor made a face, as though he had just squashed his fingers in a door, and couldn’t quite believe he’d done it. He looked down, looked back at Chris, muttered something inaudible, and slunk past the old monk, leading his horse.

Chris looked down at the Roshi. ‘How’d you know?’ he said.

The Roshi said nothing, smiling up at him. He fluffed up the straw, lay back down and went to sleep.

After a moment, Chris followed the Doctor, his horse’s hooves loud on the dry earth.

The village was a cluster of huts at the nub of four rice paddies. The fanners were hidden beneath wide straw hats, keeping the sun off their shoulders as they worked.

They’d ridden for most of the morning, galloping down roads and across fields. The Doctor rode hard, forcing Chris to keep up with him. He didn’t understand the Time Lord’s haste.

The Doctor got down from his horse when they were still a klick from the village. ‘We both look very intimidating,’ he said.

‘Me more than you,’ said Chris. ‘Do you want me to stay behind?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘We won’t stay long. I just want to pick up the gossip and ask for directions.’

There was a group of children playing at being samurai outside the village, defending a mound of dirt and shouting as they waved sticks at one another.

They fell silent as they caught sight of the two strangers. Wide black eyes in small faces, watching them.

One little boy ran back into the village. Another ran up to Chris and started pounding on his shins with the stick.

‘Ow!’ protested Chris. ‘I surrender!’

‘You’ve captured him,’ the Doctor told the boy, taking the stick away. ‘Now You’d better present your prisoner to the village headman.’

‘That’s my grandfather!’ said one of the girls, marching up.

‘He’s my prisoner,’ protested the little boy. He took Chris by the hand and led him into the centre of the huts. The children swarmed around him, brandishing their sticks, a miniature army.

The Doctor tethered the horses to a young tree, smiling to himself.

The village was a few dozen huts and a well. Somewhere, someone was singing while they worked. An elderly man was hobbling across the square of dirt in the centre of the village, leaning hard on his stick. ‘Look, Grandfather!’

said the little girl. ‘We’ve captured a giant!’

‘ *Hajimemashite!* ’ said Chris. The little girl gave him a whack in the knee to silence him. He looked back at the Doctor, helplessly.

The Time Lord walked up. The elderly man bowed to him and Chris, his eyes uncertain. ‘I am the head man of Shuuraku village.’

‘This is Chris, and I’m the Doctor. We’re on our way to Hekison. We need to buy some arrows.’

The old man bowed again. He put a hand on his granddaughter’s shoulder.

‘Go and tell the fletcher to bring a quiver of his best arrows.’ She smiled and ran off.

‘ *Arigatou,* ’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ve heard that Hekison has had excellent luck recently.

‘And no wonder,’ said the headman, ‘with the Bodhisattva herself visiting them.’

‘Kannon?’ said the Doctor.

‘I haven’t seen her myself,’ said the headman. ‘But their fortunes have been much improved since she made her first visit. Each night I pray that she might grace us with a visit as well. Come, you must drink some tea with me.’

The Doctor coughed. He glanced at Chris, still trapped by an army of children.

‘Release the prisoner,’ said the headman, ‘and go back to guarding your fort.’

‘ *Hei!* ’ shrilled the kids.

‘Lesson number forty-seven in a series of twelve million,’ murmured the Doctor

‘Know the local manners,’ said Chris, as they followed the headman to his house. The Doctor smiled at him, pleased. ‘That’s an Adjudicator lesson too,’

Chris said.

Kiiro tugged on the giant’s rope, silencing him.

Aoi’s father said, ‘We’re not interested in every detail of your journey. Stop prattling.’ The giant bowed.

‘I ought to go back and deal with that impertinent headman,’ said Father.

‘He said nothing to us about Kannon.’

The snowman bowed, indicating he wanted to speak. Aoi’s Father glared down at him. ‘My lord, I think it was just his best guess at what the other village had found,’ said the man. ‘I don’t believe he would have held any real facts back from you.’

Father considered for a moment. ‘There can’t be much left to your story,’ he said.

‘Have I told you about regeneration?’

Chris glanced over at the Doctor. ‘Not much,’ he said.

‘It’s time you knew more about it, then.’

Chris grinned. ‘Are you going to tell me about the Time Birds and the Time Bees?’

‘No I’m not,’ snapped the Doctor.

33

After a few hours’ travel, the plains had turned to forest. They were following a narrow path between the trees. There was a ribbon of blue sky far overhead, and the air was rich with the scent of humus.

Chris eased his horse forward until they were level. ‘OK,’ he said. ‘Regeneration is when you turn into someone else, right?’

‘Not precisely,’ said the Doctor. ‘I won’t go into the technical details, but, if a Time Lord comes very close to death, we can replace our bodies.’

‘Is this like the way you heal really fast?,

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s a qualitatively different process.’

‘So you change into a completely new person.’

‘In a way. . . New face, new personality. I never. . . ’ He glanced at Chris, sideways. ‘You never know what you’re going to get. Whoever it is, it won’t be me any more.’

‘It’s like reincarnation,’ said Chris. ‘Without dying.’

‘Hmm. Death’s easy for human beings. You only have to do it once.’ The Doctor frowned. ‘Regeneration is not so hard for other Time Lords as it has been for me, for a number of reasons. Not the least of which is that they do it in medical facilities. Slowly. With assistance. It was never meant to be an emergency measure.’

Chris was silent for a while. Usually the Doctor would talk about history or books, or ramble lengthily about the places and times he’d visited.

‘A penny for them,’ said the Doctor.

‘I was just wondering why you’re telling me this,’ said Chris.

‘I know I’m going to regenerate again,’ said the Doctor. ‘If I don’t die first.

I can’t change it, and yet. . . sometimes I think about going home. Hiding in the libraries and cloisters.’

Chris looked at him, wondering. ‘My life goes by so quickly compared to theirs.’ the Doctor went on. ‘Time Lords with time on their hands. Going nowhere. Risking nothing. Doing nothing.’ He gave a rueful smile, looking up at Chris as though he’d forgotten the human was there. ‘That’s when I realize I’d rather be dead than back home.’

Chris didn’t know how to respond. He couldn’t imagine being that lonely, knowing there was no one in the whole universe who was like you. The Doctor didn’t fit in anywhere, not even back at home amongst his own people. ‘You’re so different from them.’

‘I hope you never have to meet them,’ said the Doctor. ‘They haven’t the first idea about how to have fun.’

Chris smiled. ‘Ahem.’

‘Yes?’

‘Can I ask you a personal question?’

The Doctor glanced at him, guiding his horse around a fallen log. ‘You can 34

ask. . . ’ he said.

‘You’re not planning on doing this any time soon, are you? Regenerating?’

‘I’m not *planning* on doing it at all. That’s the whole problem. I know it will happen, but not *when*. Unless of course I –’

A flock of birds exploded out of the trees to their left. The Doctor turned sharply in his seat. Chris reached for his; word.

An arrow shot between them, missing Chris by an inch, and buried itself in a tree.

‘Split up!’ shouted the Doctor. His horse was suddenly galloping away.

Chris turned his steed and rode hard towards the trees, sword in hand.

‘Cowabunga!’ he yelled, as a samurai jerked out from between the trees, horse rearing. Three of them, all mounted. Two of them galloped after the Doctor.

Chris charged right at the archer. Get in close, he told himself, where his bow will he useless. The man got off one more shot, the shaft ripping through Chris’s sleeve.

He gave the archer an almighty shove with his foot, while the man was still trying to get his sword out. The samurai roared and lost his balance, almost falling off the horse, his bow tumbling away across the grass.

Chris rode in a tight circle, suddenly very aware of the killing edge of the steel in his hand. Oh shit. No stunguns. If they started fighting, someone was going to get killed. Probably him, since he hadn’t spent a lifetime learning how to fight with a chunk of metal.

What should he do? Try to get away? What about the Doctor? He couldn’t see the Time Lord, or his two pursuers.

You bastard, *you could have killed me*.

The samurai had got off his horse, and was brandishing his *katana*. He roared, ‘Get down, you coward!’

Chris circled him, staying on the horse. The samurai slashed at his leg.

Chris turned the blade away with his own

‘I don’t want to fight you!’ he shouted.

The samurai looked at him as though he was insane.

What the hell was he going to *do*?

‘So that’s all you know?’ Father was saying.

The giant nodded. Aoi’s father hadn’t spoken for minutes, standing over the prisoners, considering their story.

Aoi remembered what happened next. He had finished binding the foreigner, still shaken by the man’s inexplicable surrender. He had grabbed the trailing rope. ‘Walk ahead of me,’ he told the man.

They emerged from the trees. Aoi’s father was in the valley, running to help 35

Kiiro, who was fighting the giant.

‘No!’ his prisoner cried. He tried to run down the slope, slipping in the wet grass. Aoi pulled him up short with the rope, and they stumbled down into the valley.

Kiiro and the giant were circling each other, slashing and parrying. ‘What is he?’ breathed Aoi. ‘Another demon?’

‘We’re not demons. He’s made of the same stuff as you are,’ said the foreigner, watching the battle in distress.

Incredibly, Kiiro was winning. He struck the giant across his face, and followed through with a kick that sent the huge man sprawling in the grass. Aoi’s prisoner shouted, ‘Chris!’ as Kiiro raised his *katana* for the final blow.

‘Spare him!’ Father had shouted.

Kiiro turned to look at Aoi’s father, lowering his blade. The giant didn’t get up.

Kiiro bowed to Father and sheathed his *katana*.

Aoi's prisoner sagged against a tree. 'Your father's merciful,' he said.

The young warrior pulled him upright again. 'There are questions you're going to answer,' he said sternly. 'Both of you.'

Kiiro was tying up the giant, who was lying on the grass, breathing hard.

'Sorry, Doctor,' he gasped, as Aoi's father pulled the ropes tight.

Aoi wished they'd told more. He wanted to know who these foreigners *were*, why the Roshi had chosen them for his mission.

Why the snowman had spared his life.

'Kannon,' said Father, and snorted. 'This is the wishful thinking of frightened peasants, nothing more.'

'Possibly,' said the snowman. 'Since we didn't actually get as far as Hekison village, I can't say.'

Behind them, Kiiro was quietly drawing his *katana. Aoi* folded his arms, holding himself still. Should he say something?

The snowman said, 'If you're planning to investigate, then perhaps we can help. I've had considerable experience with deities.'

'I don't think so,' said Father. 'You don't know anything.'

'I know that, whatever this thing is, your daimyo is very interested in it,'

said the snowman. 'He's sent you to collect the *kami*, hasn't he? In the hope it will give him some kind of advantage in the civil war?'

'That's right,' said Father. 'And therefore, you are going to have to die.'

The foreigners looked at each other.

'Wait a moment,' said the snowman.

Aoi's heart was pounding in his ears. Should he intercede? Beg his father to spare them?

He closed his eyes as his father nodded to Kiiro.

4

Rescue (hopefully)

There was a brilliant flash. For a dreadful moment, Chris thought it was moonlight on moving steel.

Then he saw it was a disc of gold and red, cartwheeling across the grass, accompanied by a whizzing roar.

The samurai were looking around in bewilderment. They didn't know what the light was either. With a violent pop, another flash erupted in the nearby trees, accompanied by a great puff of foul-smelling smoke and a shower of red sparks.

There was a sharp crack. The samurai recognized that sound all right. 'Find them!' shouted their leader.

The youngest samurai snatched up a brand from the fire and ran towards the shower of red sparks. He yelled as another of the spinning yellow wheels erupted at his feet. A third landed in the fire and exploded with an almighty bang.

' *Oni-bi!* ' shouted Kiiro. 'Demon fires!'

There was a volley of shots, over their heads. 'Demons!' shouted the leader.

'We haven't got a chance in the dark!'

The young samurai ran up to Chris, and grabbed the rope trailing from his wrists. He pulled on it, hard enough for Chris to lose his balance and fall over in the grass.

'Leave the prisoners!' shouted the leader. He was already loosing the horses.

'Leave them, Aoi, they don't know anything!'

The man grabbed the young samurai and practically threw him on to his horse. A beam of red light burst out from behind the trees, roving the clearing, cutting through the drifting, brimstone-flavoured smoke. The three warriors thundered away.

Chris rolled over, and saw that the Doctor was still kneeling in place, his back to the hellish light. The Time Lord was looking over at the grass, where the yellow sparking thing was spinning its last.

37

Two figures came out of the trees. Chris squinted into the fierce red light. ‘I really, really hope this is a rescue,’ he said.

The shorter figure marched over to them. It was holding the source of the red light. Chris stared. It was a big handheld flashlight, with a torn square of red cellophane stickytaped in place over it.

The figure shone the light down on to the Doctor. ‘Catherine wheel,’ the Time Lord said.

‘Miss Penelope Gate,’ said the small figure. She was wearing what looked like a Victorian safari outfit, holding a musket in her gloved hands. She handed the torch and the gun to her companion, a slender man with red hair. ‘Bear with me – I have a pocket knife somewhere. . . ah.’

She knelt beside the Doctor and sliced easily through the rope. ‘Thank you,’

he said, gathering up his belongings from where Kiiro had dropped them.

‘Have we met, Miss Gate?’

The woman was peering at him through a pair of round spectacles. ‘I don’t believe so,’ she said. ‘Are you a member of the Royal Society?’

The Doctor grinned broadly. ‘I am indeed,’ he said. ‘And, since it won’t be founded for another century, I’ll be very interested to know how you came to join it.’

The man cleared his throat. ‘That’s all very well, Doctor,’ he said, ‘but I think we’d better get out of here before they decide retreating wasn’t honourable.

Or something.’

‘Joel Mintz!’ said Chris.

‘Yeah,’ said the redhead. ‘Hi, Chris.’

Penelope looked back and forth between them. ‘The plot thickens,’ she said.

‘Explanations and exchanges of pleasantries can wait until we’re safely away.’

She helped the Doctor to his feet. The Time Lord shook Joel’s hand, beam-ing. ‘You’ve grown,’ he said.

‘’Tis to laugh,’ said Joel. ‘This is too strange. We must have achieved infinite improbability, or something.’

‘Um,’ said Chris. ‘Could someone please untie me?’

Aoi bowed to his father. ‘May I ask you a question?’

They sat beside the fire. Kiiro was snoring, his back to a tree. The horses were still restless after their fright, snorting and stamping in the dark. They had ridden for almost an hour before Aoi’s father felt certain the demons were not pursuing them.

Father said, ‘You want to know why we ran away.’ Aoi bowed again. ‘The superior man does not needlessly expose himself to peril. There’s no dishonour in fleeing from demons.’

‘But Father,’ said Aoi, ‘isn’t it also so that you can never be a true swordsman if you are concerned for your own safety? That is what you taught me – if you stop to worry for yourself, or think about death, in that instant your opponent will cut you down.’

‘That is true when you are in battle,’ said his father. ‘But a warrior must also know when not to fight. Then the sword that gives death becomes the sword that gives life.’

‘How can a sword give life?’ Aoi wanted to know, but his father smiled, and would not answer.

They followed Penelope along a narrow trail, silently, guided by the red beam from her torch. With any luck the samurai had ridden madly off in all directions and wouldn’t be looking for them tonight.

‘The village of Hekison,’ announced the short woman, as they emerged into a clearing.

A little distance away, at the edge of the forest, there was a good-sized

collection of huts and houses. The sound of a single flute accompanied by singing drifted across with the woodsmoke from dozens of hearths.

'I think we'll make our introductions in the morning,' said Penelope. 'We've been staying here for some days. There was an empty house. We did a few repairs. Not quite enough, I'm afraid.'

Chris and Joel glanced at each other. 'How long has it been?' they said simultaneously.

Chris grinned. 'Not long for me, maybe a couple of years.'

'It's been thirteen years for me.'

'Last time we met, you were younger than me.'

'Yeah.'

The house's sliding doors were torn, and there was a hole in the roof, but otherwise it was in reasonable shape. There were a few *tatami*, and a small pile of anachronistic camping equipment neatly stacked in the corner. Joel started lighting oil lamps.

They sat in a circle on the floor, on sleeping bags and mats. For a moment the four of them just looked at one another.

Chris could see the Joel he'd known in this older man. He was still skinny and bespectacled. Under his heavy jacket he was wearing a T-shirt with a slogan Chris couldn't read. Penelope was also a redhead, a little plump. Her grey eyes were constantly moving, taking in the details of her surroundings.

'You first,' the Doctor prompted her. 'I'm dying to hear this.'

'You are time travellers,' said Penelope, 'as we are. I presume you have also invented a time vehicle.'

'Invented?' said the Doctor. 'You're Victorian, surely. What does it run on, steam? Static electricity?'

Penelope adjusted her round spectacles. 'Are you familiar with the Analytical Engine?'

'Vaguely,' said the Doctor, grinning. Chris nudged him.

‘I shall show you my conveyance in the morning. I take it,’ she repeated,

‘you have invented a similar device?’

‘No,’ admitted the Doctor. ‘I stole mine.’

He took the rainbow egg out of his pocket. ‘This, on the other hand, is my own work.’ He handed it to Penelope. Its shifting colours were reflected in her glasses.

‘What untellable technology is this?’ she breathed.

‘Look,’ the Doctor told Chris. The whole surface of the egg was turning white in her grip, blue lines erupting and blurring into the burning light.

‘Can I?’ said Joel. The Doctor nodded, and Penelope reluctantly handed the egg to him. The white receded, becoming just a flare around his fingertips.

‘Hey,’ he said. ‘How do I make this thing work?’

‘It’s working perfectly,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’d say we’ve found our temporal anomaly. Has either of you been mistaken for a deity, by any chance?’

‘Oh no,’ said Penelope. ‘Though we did have to dissuade the villagers from worshipping us after we first appeared out of thin air. No, this “god” of theirs arrived three days before we did.’ Penelope was staring at the egg. ‘What precisely is that device?’

‘It detects minor fluctuations in the timestream,’ said the Doctor. ‘Which is what Chris and I came here to investigate in the first place.’

‘In your stolen time machine.’

‘In my stolen time machine.’

Penelope returned his smile. ‘I look forward to exchanging notes with you, Doctor,’ she said. ‘In the meantime, we’d better get the fire lit.’

Chris and Joel got stuck with getting the dinner. Joel struggled with the fire pit while Chris chopped up vegetables with Penelope’s pocket knife. ‘So how is everybody in Little Caldwell?’

Joel glanced at the Doctor. ‘Oh fine. Up to our collective ass in aliens

as usual.'

The Doctor and Penelope were deep in a discussion of Newton. Chris grinned. 'So how does this time machine work?'

'I'm not sure, exactly. It runs on electricity – Penelope actually used a light-ning bolt to power her first jump, like something out of *Frankenstein!* She was aiming for the year 2000, and landed in May of 1996. Right in the middle of the magic roundabout, causing the worst traffic jam in Wiltshire history.

40

And guess who got booted out of HQ to take care of it, two days before the *Professor X* movie premiered?'

'So you've been working for the Admiral all this time?'

'Yup. Well, up until I got aboard Penelope's time machine. I couldn't talk her out of continuing her "experiment", so I figured I'd better go along and keep an eye on her. Tony whipped up a battery for it. Damn thing only goes backwards now, though, no matter how she sets the dials. She jumped all the way to the middle of the twenty-first century, then back to '96, then back to 1743, then here.'

'You want a lift home?'

'Oh. . . yeah, of course. Thanks. I wanna find out whether they went ahead with the *X* series or not. So what have you been up to? Where's Roz?'

'Roz died,' said Chris evenly.

'Oh shit!' said Joel. 'Oh man, I'm so sorry. On Earth we had a thing called tact. . . '

'It's all right,' said Chris. 'It was a long time ago.' He pushed the vegetables into a cooking pot.

Neither of them said anything for a while. Chris glanced over at the Doctor and Penelope, whose discussion had turned into an argument. She didn't look like she would take any crap from him. Good for her.

'We've been doing the usual stuff,' he told Joel. 'Saving the universe. You know. So, have you seen this god?'

'Nobody's allowed in the shrine but the priest.' Joel shrugged. 'The

villagers call it Kannon.'

'The Bodhisattva of compassion,' said Chris.

'Oh, you've been doing your homework.'

'I had to impersonate a monk a while back. I did a lot of reading. But it was mostly for appearances. I don't think I understand Zen at all.'

'You're so deep.'

'Ha ha.'

Out

The Doctor stood at the door of the house. Penelope considered him for a moment. 'What is it?' she asked.

'Can you hear that?'

'No,' said Penelope.

He turned to look at her, as though she were a student who had given the wrong answer. 'Thanks for the rescue,' he said.

'We were expecting you,' she said. Behind them, at the fire pit, Mr Mintz and Mr Cwej (which was pronounced *Kwedge*, he had told her) laughed at 41

some shared joke. 'A woman visiting her mother in Shuuraku village brought back news of your arrival there, and Mr Mintz recognized you immediately from your description. He did not seem surprised at your arrival.'

'And less surprised that we needed rescuing,' said the Doctor.

'He told me a little of your adventures,' said Penelope. 'Tell me, Doctor. . . ?'

'It's just Doctor,' he said.

'Tell me, why have you come here?'

'As I said, I detected a fluctuation in the timelines,' he said. 'Nothing major.

I thought this would be a bit of a holiday, actually.'

‘You didn’t allow for the temperament of the natives,’ said Penelope, adjusting her glasses.

‘It’s a bad time for the country,’ said the Doctor. ‘Though we’d have had an even rougher time of it if we’d arrived next century. . . ’

‘The Tokugawa era, yes,’ said Penelope. ‘But back to the reason for your arrival.’

‘How old are you?’

‘Twenty-seven. Do please tell me more about why you’ve come here.’

The Doctor smiled. ‘I’m being interrogated,’ he said.

‘Forgive my curiosity,’ said Penelope. ‘After Mr Mintz, you are only the second time traveller I have encountered. He says that you make minor adjustments to history. You do not merely investigate, you interfere.’

‘If there’s something out of place here, I’ll put it right.’

‘I see. And precisely what gives you the right to do that?’

‘I *am* being interrogated,’ said the Doctor.

‘Please,’ said Penelope. ‘Don’t sidestep the question. Are you some sort of cosmic policeman? To whom do you answer for your actions?’

‘Myself, mostly,’ he said.

‘And if your actions leave a situation worse than when you began?’

That shaft struck home. His eyes were suddenly deadly serious, searching her face. ‘If you arrived in your time machine,’ he asked, ‘and someone was about to, *exempli gratia*, murder a child, would you stop them?’

‘Of course I wouldn’t. I have no right to interfere with the flow of history.’

‘Ah. That’s the easy answer. But what might you really do? If it came to the crunch? I’m going for a walk.’

He slipped out of the door without looking back. Penelope watched him go, wondering why he didn’t take a light.

Chris and Joel had been heating sake over the firepit for an hour. Penelope had muttered something about the cat that swallowed the cream and had gone out half an hour ago, carrying the big torch with her.

42

'So,' said Chris, filling his fourth or maybe fifth cup of the rice wine, 'is this just a holiday for you? Or are you going back to work for the Admiral?'

Joel's glasses were round mirrors reflecting the flickering fire. 'I haven't decided yet. Thirteen years is a long time.'

'Sounds like you were looking for a way out.'

'No,' said Joel. He took a mouthful from his cup. 'It's good work. The underground railroad has spread all over the planet; I've lost count of how many stranded aliens we've helped out. It'd be easy to spend a lifetime doing that. I think the Admiral even wants me to follow in his footsteps. Take over when he's too old to be running around, dodging the CIA.'

'Yeah, but don't you ever get the urge to go do something else?'

'I nearly walked out after the time we helped that Lalandian group. They'd been killing and eating people for weeks before we tracked them down.'

'What did you do?' Chris spilt warm sake over his hand as he filled another cup.

'We fixed their ship and sent them home,' said Joel. 'They'd chewed up about twenty human beings. Swore blind they weren't on safari – they were just stuck and running out of supplies. I nearly walked. Isaac talked me out of it in the end.'

'What if,' said Chris, 'what if, though, you didn't feel like you were up to the job any more? If, you know, like, something happened and it was your fault. . . '

'The weirdest thing,' said Joel. He put down his sake cup with exaggerated care. 'You have to remember not to tell him this. The weirdest thing was when I met the Doctor. Back in '87.'

'Four years after we were there. . . Hey, did he make a surprise visit

and not tell me?'

Joel shook his head. He leant on Chris's shoulder and whispered into his ear. 'It wasn't the same one.'

'Whoah,' said Chris. 'Whoah, whoah.'

'Yeah,' said Joel. 'When he saw me he gave me this look and said, and I quote because I remember this word for word, "Second chances are rare. Be careful not to do something you'll regret later. And this conversation never happened."'

'Did you ever find out what it meant?'

'Not yet,' said Joel. 'Not yet.' He tipped the sake flask upside down. 'No more.'

'We better go to bed then,' said Chris.

The Doctor moved through the blackness, cat-silent, holding the rainbow egg in one hand. He had recalibrated it to work in flavours instead of colours. He 43

was following a trail of limonene through the streets of the village. He could hear the peasants breathing in their sleep.

He stopped beside a hut, brushing his fingertips over the surface of the ovoid. He accessed the recording of Penelope's temporal aura. In this mode, it was lemon crush with an edge of battery acid, mouth-wateringly intense.

Whatever it was he'd come to find, she was saturated with its essence.

Analytical Engine, indeed!

He followed the trail into the forest, just a little way. The air was sharp and cool. Distantly, a bird cried out.

Penelope's time machine was a converted hansom cab, a dark shape amongst the trees. A horseless carriage, thought the Doctor. He pulled open one of the doors, smelling leather and machine oil.

There were seats for four, one of which was taken up with a weight of machinery, like something escaped from a Victorian textile mill. The Doctor climbed up into the cabin, pulling out his flashlight, and examined the vehicle's workings.

‘A clockwork time machine,’ he said, after a few minutes. ‘How quaint.

Come up here, I want to talk to you.’

‘Sir,’ said Penelope from outside, ‘remove yourself from my cab, or I will be forced to take steps.’

He turned. She was holding a musket rifle, fuse burning, the barrel carefully pointed at the ground. ‘Do get down,’ she said.

The Doctor got down. ‘I can’t even see a power source,’ he said, pocketing his flashlight. ‘How does it work?’

‘It moves through the fourth dimension,’ she said. ‘I have adapted a miniature Analytical Engine to make calculations. My equations are based on Riemann’s metric tensor.’ The Doctor laughed. ‘It works,’ bristled Penelope. ‘My presence here is all the proof you ought to require!’

‘You’re a scientist.’

‘I am,’ said Penelope, moving the tip of her musket in small agitated circles. ‘And one who is very weary of being constantly patronized. At least this machine is the work of my own hands.’

‘But is it?’ The Doctor took out the rainbow egg, and recalibrated it with his thumbnail, watching as the slick of colours spread over its surface. ‘Your horseless time machine isn’t the primary source of the temporal distortion.

Look.’

He tossed her the egg. Penelope caught it with both hands, and suddenly realized that she wasn’t holding the musket any more.

The Doctor licked his fingers and quenched the smouldering fuse with a pinch. He said, ‘There’s something else here, an intermittent but powerful 44

source of temporal fluctuation. Unless I miss my guess, it’s the power source for your time machine.’

‘My machine has its own source.’

‘That mutated Tzun battery?’ He shook his head. ‘It generates enough power to run the Engine, but nothing like the amount needed to

actually distort the dimensions. Without a real power source, your conveyance is nothing more than a toy.'

'Which distant century are you from?' Penelope held the egg close to her face. 'Is your arrogance pure egotism, or do even the greatest scientific advances of my age seem like the dabblings of children to you?'

She threw him back the egg. He plucked it from the air with one hand.

'Miss Gate,' he said, 'I think I've misjudged you.'

She folded her arms. 'I see. You hoped to goad me into some sort of admis-sion.'

He smiled. 'Are you what you seem?'

'Apparently,' she said, 'I'm even less than what I seem. I'm not even an inventor.'

'Whatever your invention's capabilities are, temporal displacement isn't one of them.'

'If Riemann's equations are not the method, then I shall be fascinated to discover what mechanism is capable of propelling a vehicle through history.'

The Doctor leant on the carriage. 'Why time travel?' he said. 'Why did you want to create a time machine?'

'For the scientific achievement,' she said, 'and so that I could explore. Imagine paying Shakespeare a visit –'

'Been there.'

'Or Marco Polo. '

'Done that.'

'Or Richard the Lionheart.'

'Bought the postcard.'

'If you do not cease bragging,' said Penelope, 'I may kick you in the shin.'

He laughed and passed her back the musket.

The Room With No Doors

Chris opened his eyes. He was in the Room With No Doors.

Hell. This was hell. This was where you were sent to be punished for everything you'd done. For everything you hadn't done. This was Justice.

Buried forever in a box, in the dark, alone, because you ought to have been the one who died, you ought to have been the one who was a hero, you ought to have done better, been better, you're never good enough and you'll never be good enough again!

'I'm sorry!' he screamed at the blank walls. 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!'

But his voice echoed back at him, and no one answered him, no one came to let him out.

Because he deserved to be there.

And he knew it.

'For Christ's sake, snap out of it!'

Chris opened his eyes. Joel was thumping him on the arm. 'I'm awake, I'm awake!' he protested.

'Yeah, and so's everyone else, I bet.'

Joel clambered out from under the blanket and slid open one of the doors.

There was no sign of the Doctor or Penelope.

‘Moonlight stroll?’ joked Chris shakily.

Joel pushed the door shut. ‘That must’ve been a doozy of a nightmare.’

‘Occupational hazard.’

‘I bet.’ Joel had lit one of the small lamps, throwing yellow shadows over his face. ‘Do you want to talk about it?’

Chris said, ‘Did you ever meet Liz Shaw?’

‘Yeah,’ said Joel. ‘I did, once. She came to hassle the Admiral about something or other. Nice old lady.’

‘I killed her,’ said Chris.

Joel looked at him. ‘Shit!’

‘I don’t mean literally,’ said Chris. ‘If it hadn’t been for me, she’d still be alive.’

47

‘Oh,’ murmured Joel. ‘Occupational hazard.’

‘Yeah,’ said Chris. ‘Come back here – I’m freezing to death.’

Joel wriggled back under the covers. ‘This is embarrassing,’ he mumbled.

‘Watch your elbows,’ said Chris. ‘Embarrassing?’

‘Circumstances force me into bed with a gorgeous blond from an exotic future,’ muttered Joel, ‘and it’s you.’

‘Thanks,’ said Chris. ‘I think. What’d you say?’

‘Nothing,’ sighed Joel. ‘Go back to sleep.’

48

5

Yes, but is it Kannon?

Out

The Doctor went into the shrine first. Penelope waited outside, musket in hand, nervously glancing around.

The villagers had been kind to them, newcomers who must seem so bizarre.

Thank goodness for Joel's translator. After their simple hospitality, she did not wish to frighten or offend them.

After a moment the Doctor came back out of the humble building. He put a conspiratorial finger to his lips.

Penelope took out Joel's *flashlight*, following the Doctor into the small building. She hesitated with her thumb on the switch of the portable electric light.

Since the man was making such a show of being able to see in the dark, let him examine the 'god' without benefit of light.

She was surprised when he took out a torch of his own, no larger than a pen, and played it over the dark bulk of the 'god'. He let out a long, slow whistle, making Penelope jump.

It was as impressive as when she'd first seen it. More impressive, since the shadows hid so much detail. Rather than raise the roof of the shrine, previously inhabited by some kind of Shinto idol, they had simply removed the floor and dug into the earth. The room smelt like a tilled field. Or an open grave.

It was ten feet long, a mass of melted stone, with patches of shiny metal showing through here and there. At the top, there were perhaps a dozen jointed metal. . . arms?

'Kannon of a Thousand Hands,' said the Doctor.

The impact had crushed some of the 'arms' and bent others, so that they reached out from the object's body in random, twisted directions. It made Penelope think of the discarded shell of some giant, macabre insect.

'Try to be quiet,' she whispered. 'No one but a priest is supposed to enter the shrine. I have no idea what the penalty for blasphemy might be.'

The Doctor's torch beam moved across a row of small pots filled with earth, set before the kami. Offerings of some kind? The pots overflowed the wooden building, on to the steps.

'I thought at first it must be a meteor,' she said. 'But it seems to be a metallic object, partly encased in melted rock.'

'Soil,' said the Doctor. Kneeling, he brushed his fingertips across the surface of the *kami*. 'Melted right on to the metal skin. It must have made quite an impact.'

The Doctor switched off his torch. Penelope blinked in the sudden blackness, and then was half blinded. She raised a hand to her face, involuntarily.

It was the rainbow-coloured egg, singing with brilliance.

'An object from another world,' breathed Penelope, looking at the kami. 'Or perhaps from Earth's future? How long does it take the human race to develop vehicles which can journey through space?'

'Wouldn't you like to know,' muttered the Doctor. He was brushing a hand over the surface of the object, the shining ovoid cupped in his other palm.

Penelope made a sour face at his back.

'I am certain that I am very stupid,' she said, 'not to recognize it at once.'

He took out some sort of mechanism and waved it over the surface of the object, listened to the slow clicking noise emanating from the machine. 'Thought so. . . '

'No doubt you know precisely what it is.' For a moment Penelope felt the clenching in her heart she associated with her husband – her *former* husband.

She pushed him out of her thoughts.

'I have no idea,' said the Doctor, standing up and taking the torch out of his mouth. 'But I seriously doubt it's here to make the rice grow faster.' He looked around suddenly. 'There! Did you hear that?'

Penelope held her breath, listening. Were they about to be discovered?

They waited for long seconds. The Doctor shone his torch beam across

her face. She shook her head.

‘Hmm. . . ’ The Doctor snapped off his torch, plunging them back into blackness. ‘Those *bushi* know this is here. If they’re feeling brave, we can expect them tomorrow morning. If their discretion is the better part of their valour, they’ll be back with reinforcements.’ He eyed the thing. ‘We need to find some way of getting rid of it.’

‘But we must discover its true nature,’ said Penelope. ‘What is it? How can it have these powers?’

‘I thought we weren’t supposed to interfere?’

‘We can observe,’ said Penelope, adjusting her glasses, without interfering.’

The Doctor grinned. ‘You’re going to love Heisenberg. Seriously, I’ve done about all the observing I can without proper tools. I can’t even see half the 50

thing’s surface for mud. For now, what it actually is doesn’t seem to be as important as the effect it’s having on everyone around it.’

‘As for the *bushi*,’ said Penelope, ‘the village is fortified to some extent, and it has a flesh-and-blood guardian. But I fear you’re right: the inhabitants are in great danger. We’ll speak with the headman in the morning.’

They hesitated at the doorway of the shrine, listening. It seemed no one had been disturbed by their visit.

Penelope glanced back at the object once more. ‘In the morning,’ she whispered again.

Chris opened one eye as someone booted him gently. ‘G’way,’ he said.

‘Come on,’ Joel shouted. ‘You’re missing the meeting.’

Chris opened his bleary eyes. He was lying on a *tatami*, huddled under a sleeping bag and a blanket. The cut on his cheek throbbed and the stubble on his chin itched.

Given the choice of this hangover and more hours in the Room, he wasn’t sure which was the worse fate.

He crawled out and pulled on his straw shoes. He didn’t bother with his topknot, just wandered out of the hut, holding his swords.

Joel had kneaded and stroked his shoulders until he'd drifted back to sleep.

He had hoped that he'd already done the Room thing for one night, that, if he had to have another dream, it would be about something else.

But he had found himself back in there, and he'd just huddled in a corner of the Room, forehead on his knees, waiting for morning. Hoping for morning.

He shoved the swords through his sash, awkwardly. He was halfway across the square when he realized that there was a samurai blocking his path.

'You there,' said the man. 'What do you think you're doing, wearing two swords?'

The man was weathered-looking, maybe in his forties. He had two coal-black eyes and a small moustache and beard. His hand rested on the hilt of his *katana*.

'Not again,' murmured Chris, glancing around. There was no sign of the Doctor. The few villagers he could see were carefully ignoring them.

'Speak up!' snapped the samurai. 'Are you afraid to face me?'

Chris found his mouth twisting up in irritation. He walked forward, but the warrior moved to block his path. 'You are a coward!' said the man. 'Why don't you draw your sword and defend yourself?'

'I've got no quarrel with you, whoever you are,' said Chris. 'Let me past, please.'

'Or you'll do what?'

'Ask you again,' said Chris.

The samurai grinned. 'Wherever you come from,' he said, 'you're made out of iron.' He clapped an armoured glove on to Chris's shoulder. 'I know Japanese samurai who'd have drawn their sword at lesser provocation. But sometimes it takes more strength not to draw your sword.'

Chris's scowl mutated into a helpless smile. 'Kuriisu,' he said, 'at your service,' and bowed.

'I am Kame,' said the samurai.

While he was bowing, Chris tripped him up. The samurai looked up at him from the dust in astonishment.

They both started to laugh.

Penelope glanced over at the Doctor, who was listening quietly while the headman spoke, his eyes focused on nothing. She was trying to guess his age.

Sonchou-san, the headman, had the largest house in the village. A proper house, made of cedar, not one of the rough thatched huts that did for most of the peasants. The drawing room, where they were sitting – the Doctor had murmured the suggestion that she sit with her legs to one side, instead of painfully trying to kneel – had an alcove with flowers, a wall hanging, and even a bookshelf.

Sonchou's wife had served them green tea and cakes at the low table. Like those of the other peasants, her clothes were simple linen, but clean and cared for.

Penelope was trying to copy the Doctor, who seemed to know what he was doing, waiting until their host drank before he started on the tea, holding the cup in both hands. He had even brought Sonchou-san a visiting gift, a small bundle wrapped in white paper.

'The stone is not Kannon herself,' said the old man. His beard was just beginning to grey. 'But an image sent by her. It fell into the rice one night.

The earth trembled, and fire leapt into the sky. When we went to see what had happened, the rice around the statue was fully grown, almost a quarter of the field. It was the Bodhisattva's gift to us.'

Penelope said, 'Tell him about your leg.'

The old man smiled, inclining his head in a small bow. He was kneeling, but now he unfolded himself, standing and lifting the leg of his trousers with a murmured apology.

There was a wide white scar across his left shin.

‘I was dying when the stone fell,’ he said. ‘I had fallen from my horse. My leg was broken so badly that the bone was protruding from the flesh. I would have bled to death. But when the stone was brought into the village, my wound was miraculously healed.’

52

‘That would tend to catch one’s attention,’ said the Doctor. ‘Had the bone been set?’

‘No,’ said the headman. ‘I felt intense pain as it was moved back into place, and further pain as my flesh healed before my eyes.’

‘May I?’ said the Doctor. The old man gestured him over, and he gently touched the man’s leg, using just his fingertips.

‘Psychokinesis,’ he told Penelope.

She shook her head. ‘Mediumistic balderdash. The object is certainly some sort of machine, with advanced surgical abilities.’

Sonchou-san said solemnly, ‘We have suffered a great deal in recent years.

Many of us were killed during uprisings, including much of my family. When the wars began, we had to erect the fence around our village to keep out bandits and desperate soldiers. More than once our crops and goods have been taken by the samurai. But recently our luck has improved. We have pros-pered. With the arrival of Kame, our guardian, we gained a further modicum of protection. All of this was the Bodhisattva’s work. Under the kindly eye of Kannon, I feel we are safe at last.’

‘Unfortunately,’ said the Doctor, ‘word of the statue’s arrival has already reached Gufuu Kocho, and it won’t be long before the other daimyo find out about it.’

‘Surely Kannon will protect us.’

‘Hopefully,’ said the Doctor, ‘but think seriously about this. What will you do if Gufuu’s troops demand you give them the statue? What if bandits attack the village to steal it? Having something so precious may have put you in terrible danger.’

The headman shook his head. ‘We will not give up the statue,’ he said. ‘We are its rightful custodians.’

‘Very well,’ said the Doctor. ‘But believe me, by the end of today, you’ll know just how much Gufuu Kocho wants what you have.’

‘You’re lucky to have a master,’ said Kame. He circled Chris, his *katana* held lightly in one hand. ‘My lord’s entire family was destroyed in a siege. Of his retainers, only ten survived. All of us *ronin*, masterless warriors.’

‘That’s terrible,’ said Chris. He squinted, shrugging his injured cheek as he took small steps from side to side. The sword felt heavy today, awkward.

‘In my youth, I would never have considered working for peasants,’ said Kame. ‘But if you survive to my age your perspective begins to change. These people sheltered my group after we escaped that conflagration. In return, I offered them my protection.’

He struck out at Chris, who turned the blow away with his own sword.

‘Good,’ said the ronin. ‘There, I’ve told you why I’m here. It’s your turn.’

53

‘I travelled here through time with an extraterrestrial to investigate the temporal anomaly.’

The ronin struck again, and Chris parried again, nearly losing his balance.

‘Less force,’ said Kame. ‘Your balance is an advantage, but your weight is not.

We will try again later.’

Chris let out a snort of frustration as Kame sheathed his *katana*. ‘You know,’

he said, ‘I’m a crack shot with a blaster. And you can even set them to knock people out instead of killing them. These things –’ he jiggled his sword ‘–

they’re so clumsy, they just chop through people as though they were sides of meat.’

‘The real art,’ said the ronin, taking out his fan, ‘is not the life-giving

sword, nor the death-giving sword, but never having to draw your sword at all.' He opened the fan.

'Whatever you say,' said Chris.

In an instant Kame had flipped the fan shut and knocked Chris's weapon out of his hand with the metal edge. The Adjudicator looked at his fallen sword, and back at the samurai, who was innocently fanning himself.

The Doctor was coming out of the headman's house, Penelope at his side, stressing out. The Doctor waved to Chris.

'When you are as old as I am,' said Kame, 'and you begin to know that you have done enough killing, perhaps it will make more sense to you.'

Penelope ran up the steps of the shrine, stopping just short of the door. She snatched up one of the pots – the pots that last night had contained soil. Now they were crammed with madly blooming flowers.

The Doctor was looking at a flower. It hung on the end of a branch, alone, trembling in the breeze.

Did humans experience flowers in the same way as he did? Their senses were duller, simpler. The scent and colour would not, could not, be as sharp with, well, inferior processing equipment.

His eyes traced the faint UV pattern which guided bees to the petals. It must have been such a shock when the human race had first looked at a flower under ultraviolet light. So much for Sherlock Holmes's idea that the rose proved God; the blossoms' beauty wasn't meant for humans at all.

On the other hand, how many Time Lords would bother to stop and look at a flower? After a few thousand years in the sterile air of the Capitol, your emotions simply withered away. In a lifetime a human would know fear and anger, love and pleasure, hate and joy. A Time Lord might feel apprehension, irritation, amusement, a certain uninterested curiosity. If anything stronger flared in their hearts, they were expected to silently quash it.

And they almost never laughed.

No wonder they hated him so much. Well, found him so distasteful.

He was sitting on a stone at the edge of the forest, looking down at the village. The patterns of ordinary life were in motion. Children were playing, women were weaving, and in the fields he could see the wide hats of the farmers bobbing up and down as they worked. Robust patterns, centuries old.

Fragile patterns, easily disrupted by an afternoon's random violence.

Chris was coming up the hill towards him, adjusting his jacket. The Doctor waited.

'So,' said Chris, 'what is that thing, and what are we going to do about it?'

'I don't know,' said the Doctor, answering both questions. 'What do you think we should do?'

Chris gave him a surprised look. He leant against a tree in a very unsamurai-like slouch. 'I don't know.'

The Doctor went back to considering the flower. Chris fidgeted. 'How can we find out what it is?' he said.

'Simple. Open it up.'

'It looks like a satellite,' said Chris. 'With antennae at the top. Maybe it fell out of orbit. But if it's some kind of container, Goddess knows what could be in it. Radioactive waste, anything.'

'Schrödinger's Cat,' said the Doctor. 'It could be anything – until we open the box.'

'Do you reckon it *is* Kannon?' asked Chris. The Doctor tilted his head. 'I don't,' the Adjudicator went on. 'Kannon's derived from the Hindu Avalokites-vara. The pod would've had to have landed centuries ago. Assuming this is its first visit.'

'Mmm. . . '

'You said you'd had a lot of experience with deities.'

'None of it good,' said the Doctor. 'It's amazing how a spot of omniscience can make someone miserable company.'

Chris laughed, and the Doctor smiled despite himself.

‘What do you think of Penelope?’ said the Doctor, changing the subject.

‘She’s for real, I think. But she’s scared of you. That’s why she keeps arguing with you.’

‘Mmm. She’s got the wrong impression from whatever Joel has told her.

She thinks I’m some sort of temporal traffic warden.’

Chris laughed. It was still a boy’s laugh, clear and happy, after everything he’d been through. ‘Nothing wrong with being a traffic cop.’

‘True.’

‘No, I mean it. When I joined the Academy, I wanted to be out there solving great crimes, but the first thing they put you on is traffic. I hated it at first. I felt like such a doofus telling people off for flying their flitters over the speed 55

limit. You know, like I was their mom. And then I saw my first really bad accident. . . ’ He shuddered, rubbing at the cut on his face. ‘It wasn’t a great job, but at least I was saving some lives.’

‘Let me see that.’ The Doctor got up and examined the sword cut on Chris’s cheek. He took a small bottle of salve out of his pocket and applied a dab to the cut with his little finger. Chris winced, trying to stand still.

‘Sometimes,’ said the young man quietly, ‘I kind of wish I could go back to being a traffic cop.’

The Doctor sat back and looked at him, feeling a sadness deep in his chest.

And something else: a claustrophobic, uneasy feeling. He shrugged, and the feeling was gone.

Chris said, ‘I really let you down in that fight. We would have both died.’

‘I didn’t manage any better,’ said the Doctor. ‘I should have seen it coming.

And I should have been able to talk my way out of that situation.’

‘They were going to kill us no matter what,’ said Chris. He breathed a long sigh, and murmured something.

‘Sorry?’ said the Doctor.

‘It’s just. . . ’ The Doctor waited patiently. ‘I don’t want anybody else to die because of me,’ whispered Chris. ‘That’s all., And how do you answer that?

The Doctor let a few minutes pass. When it became clear that Chris had nothing to add, he said, ‘There’s only one way of guaranteeing it.’

‘I know,’ said the boy. ‘Lock myself in the TARDIS and never come out.’

The Doctor sat back on his stone and drew his thoughts together. ‘Do you think she’ll be more useful to us if she’s frightened, or if she’s not frightened?’

‘Penelope? I hadn’t thought of it that way,’ Chris said.

No, thought the Doctor, of course you hadn’t.

‘It’d be better if she wasn’t scared,’ the young man decided. ‘If she trusts us, she’ll be more likely to tell us things. And besides, it isn’t fair to hold a non-existent threat over her head.’

‘I’m not the only thing she’s afraid of, though. . . What should we do about it?’

‘I’m going to talk to her,’ said Chris. He was frowning as he walked away.

The Doctor sighed.

When he looked back to the flower, it had fallen from the branch.

Out out

Penelope sat cross-legged by the smoking firepit. In her lap she held the Doctor’s rainbow egg.

56

Tanganyika had never been like this. She would have preferred the African heat to the cold Japanese spring, the rough floor of a tent to the smooth floor of the house. Travelling where she pleased, in that

one wild year before her marriage, instead of being trapped in a foreign, ancient place.

Where her fingers contacted the egg's surface, the colours rearranged themselves. The object in the shrine had left a trace on her, marked her in some way. The Doctor assured her it was nothing to be concerned about. Nonethe-less, she felt contaminated.

She sighed, watching the play of colours over the strange machine's surface. She had spent the better part of an hour attempting repairs on her time conveyance, but she still could see nothing wrong with the mechanism. It simply would not function. The electrical battery's indicator showed that it was still half full; it was as though some other, hidden source of power had been extinguished.

Despite the emptiness of the room, she felt that the walls were too close. It was a familiar feeling. She had experienced the same sense of enclosedness, of trappedness, in her home in London. In the cluttered bedroom and the overfilled study. In the dining room every evening when her husband had begun one of his interminable lectures.

Penelope shook herself. She was free of that suffocating residence at last.

But what did her freedom mean, if the mechanism by which she had achieved it no longer functioned?

The sense of confinement rose up in her suddenly, like a wave of panic. She had to find some way out of here.

Joel knocked on the doorframe, awkwardly, and ducked under it. Penelope tucked the glowing egg away in her jacket. 'Mr Mintz,' she said.

'How's the horseless TARDIS?'

'My time conveyance?' Penelope frowned. 'I owe you an honest answer. My repairs have made no difference. We appear to have two options, neither of which I find appealing.'

Joel sat down near hen 'Either we're stuck here, or we ask the Doctor for help.'

Penelope's scowl deepened. 'I am disturbed at being forced into relying on him.'

‘You’ve got nothing to worry about, Miss Gate. He’s one of the good guys, he really is. Besides, I already asked Chris if they could give you – us – a lift home.’

‘I don’t wish to return home. You know that, Mr Mintz.’

‘Oh, come on!’ said Joel cheerfully. ‘Think of the acclaim, even if there are still a few bugs in the ol’ time machine! Even the Wright brothers did the odd nosedive.’

57

‘No doubt,’ said the inventor. ‘Though if my time machine had truly made any scientific impact, you would have heard of it in the late twentieth century.’

Joel looked glum. ‘Well, anyway. . . ’ he said.

Chris glanced up at the sky. It was a clear, cold day. He could smell blossoms and turned earth and smoke. There wasn’t a cloud to be seen.

Why could he hear thunder?

By the time he had realized, Kame was already running towards the village gates.

Chris shouted and leapt down from the veranda of the house, tugging at his *katana*.

There were maybe a dozen of them, riding like madmen towards the town.

Purple banners flapped behind them. Children were crying and running, getting out of the way of the hooves. Farmers were running in from the fields, yelling.

‘Close the gates!’ Kame was shouting. ‘Don’t let them in!’ The villagers were pushing the wooden gates closed as the last farmers slid inside. But they’d waited too long. Two women were sent flying as a samurai charged the gate, kicking it open.

Kame drew his *katana* and shouted a challenge as the purple samurai burst into the village, sending one of the peasants tumbling in the dust.

One of the mounted samurai leapt down from his horse. Chris was

running up.

He saw the sword flash down into Kame's shoulder, a blue line of movement, reflecting the clear sky. He found himself slowing to a trot, then to a stumble, and suddenly he was on his knees in the dust, gazing at the fallen body of the ronin as dark blood spread across the ground.

'Shut the gates!' the man roared, his bloodied sword flashing in the sunlight.

'Shut them! There are demons coming! Demons!'

6

Flying Heads

Chris was watching Kame's blood spreading out across the half-frozen soil. He was fascinated by the edge of the puddle, where the surface tension created a rounded shape.

Distantly he could hear people yelling and screaming and kids crying and a little voice inside him telling him he had seen far worse than this, far worse than this, he should get up and keep functioning.

The blood didn't seem to be soaking into the ground much, although it wasn't spreading out as quickly as before.

The human sounds were quietening down. Chris looked around, slowly.

Everything was moving like a sim played at half-speed and slightly out of focus. The villagers had formed a frightened knot behind him, across the square from the dozen samurai.

The Doctor walked through them, and they parted around him. He headed straight towards Chris.

The Doctor knelt beside Kame's fallen body for a moment, ignoring the samurai standing over him with the killing blade still in his hand. He stood up and turned back to Chris.

'Get up!' he stage whispered. He put his hands on Chris's face, trying to get his companion's attention. Chris blinked, wondering why he couldn't seem to respond. 'Get up, get up!'

Chris saw the samurai looming behind the Doctor. His sword was still drawn. The Adjudicator felt his mouth opening as his brain tried to shout out a warning, but suddenly everything was moving at normal speed and there wasn't any time left.

The samurai's sword rose and came flashing down and broke into three pieces that spun away from the Doctor's back without ever having touched it.

The Time Lord turned around. 'Do stop that,' he said. 'Someone will get hurt.'

* * *

59

The Doctor and Chris sat on opposite sides of the fireplace. Outside, on the veranda, their guards were as silent as the village.

The rest of Captain Hadankyou's samurai were keeping watch through gaps in the village's fence. Waiting for the demons to attack. The villagers had been ordered to keep watch as well, or to stay in their houses.

Between the demons and the Doctor, the samurai's leader seemed close to panic. Chris hoped the other time travellers had found some way out of the village. Who knew what could happen if the Captain got another surprise?

'Neat trick with the breaking sword,' he said.

'Thanks,' said the Doctor. 'Would you like to know how it's done?'

'Yeah.'

'So would I.'

'Now what do we do?'

The Doctor looked up from the fire. 'What do we know about these samurai?'

'Don't ask me any more questions,' said Chris. 'Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it.'

The Doctor's blue eyes raked over him once, and then his gaze fell back to the flames. As though he hadn't found what he was looking

for.

Chris lay down on his side, curling up to make the most of the thin heat of the fire. He cushioned his head on his arms and closed his eyes.

The sword sliced into Kame's shoulder

He opened his eyes. The Doctor's face was old and sad, watching the thin trail of smoke rising from the firepit. He closed his eyes again.

The sword sliced into Kame's shoulder. The sword held by the samurai in black armour. Captain Hadankyou. Calm face, dark eyes full of hotly denied terror, purple banner behind him, his horse stamping and snorting while the other samurai watched.

All with purple banners, with some kind of geometric pattern on them.

Maybe a stylized flower.

The samurai who had captured them yesterday had worn orange-gold banners with a butterfly design repeated three times. So these purple-banner samurai worked for a different daimyo. An enemy lord, or an ally?

And what were the demons they had been running from? *Tengu*, those little forest goblins? *Pretas*, the hungry ghosts? *Oni?* Foreigners? Aliens? Mutant scum-suckers? Whatever they were, they were enough to scare off a dozen samurai. . .

Hey, that meant the purple samurai probably didn't know about the *kami* up in the shrine. They'd just come here to get away from the demons.

If the two daimyo were enemies, that meant they'd both want the thing.

Whatever it was. If the purple samurai found out about it and reported back, 60

Hekison village could find itself in the middle of a battlefield. Hell, if the three butterfly samurai brought back reinforcements, and found the village full of purple troopers. . .

'We can't let them see the pod,' Chris said.

The Doctor glanced up. ‘For the moment, they’re more worried about these

“demons”. . . ’

‘Only the demons aren’t too interested in them. Why haven’t they shown up yet?’

‘Whatever they are, hopefully they won’t show up at all.’

‘I hope they do show up,’ said Chris. ‘After. . . the trouble they’ve caused.’

‘Things are complicated enough as they are,’ grumbled the Doctor.

The sword sliced into Kame’s shoulder

‘He just ran at them,’ said Chris, bewildered.

‘Like a good samurai.’

‘Yeah, but a lousy strategist.’

‘According to Nakano Jin’emon, learning military strategy is useless. Don’t stop to deliberate: just close your eyes and run at the enemy.’

‘That is so dumb,’ said Chris. ‘Just stupid.’

‘You’re angry with Kame for dying.’

‘Yeah, I guess I am. I was just getting to like him.’ Chris shook his head.

‘Stupid.’

‘But well in accord with *bushido*. Ideally, the way of the warrior creates elite fighters, deeply spiritual soldiers free from the fear of death.’

‘And lots and lots of corpses.’

‘Yes. Unfortunately,’ said the Doctor, ‘so does meticulous planning.’

‘Why does bad stuff keep happening?’ asked Chris. His voice suddenly sounded like a kid’s voice. ‘I mean. . . ’ The Doctor waited. ‘I don’t know if I can keep doing this.’

‘You froze up,’ insisted the Doctor. ‘You just had a bad moment. It happens.’

Chris picked at a splinter on the floor. ‘Something I want to ask you.’

‘You can ask.’

‘Where do we go when we die?’

The Doctor looked at him in astonishment. ‘What makes you think I know?’

‘I just thought that, if anybody knew, you probably would. After six times.

And that was why you weren’t scared of dying.’

‘It appears, Squire Cwej, that you have a number of mistaken beliefs about me.’ The Doctor produced a pencil from his sleeve, glanced at the tip, and rummaged for a pencil sharpener. ‘I met a species once who knew. . . ’

‘Really?’

‘Well, everyone *claims* to know.’ The Doctor was creating a single, coiling pencil shaving. ‘But I think the Ikkaba really did. They weren’t telling, though.

61

They just walked into the fire. You remember the Turtle, you know what it’s like.’

‘The samurai *want* to die?’

‘The idea is not to give death a second thought – neither want it nor not want it. And if I haven’t made this clear enough yet, regeneration isn’t death.

Not total death. Not the genuine article.’ He flicked the shaving loose, and it vanished in the flames.

‘But if you get a different personality, isn’t that like dying? Where do you go?’

The Doctor gave Chris a sideways look that made him wish he hadn’t asked.

‘I know exactly where I’m going,’ he said, and wouldn’t say anything more.

Out out out

Penelope found herself wishing for the three hundredth time that she had never read *The Cask of Arnontillado*.

At least she was small enough to fit into the trunk without bending. Mr Mintz was positively squashed, his back bent awkwardly. A little light was leaking in through the bamboo; she could see his glasses as he shrugged, trying to get into a more comfortable position.

Despite the discomfort, Penelope relished the thought of her husband finding out she had been locked in a box with another man. Fortunately, Mr Mintz was being as much a gentleman as circumstances permitted.

She saw another spot of light as he wriggled down further, trying to see through one of the holes in the trunk. She could see a small section of the hut if she rested her head against the side.

A peasant family was sitting together, speaking quietly. Joel had silenced his translation device, but the trepidation in their voices was unmistakable.

They kept glancing at the trunk. She hoped their courage did not falter.

Once it was dark it would be safe for her and Joel to creep out of their hiding place, but they faced the possibility of being locked in here for the rest of the day, with no way of knowing what was happening in the village or what had become of the Doctor and Chris.

Penelope felt another stab of panic at the prospect of being trapped in this time. She thought she had given adequate thought to the possibility before setting out on her first journey. But, if the truth was known, she had given little thought to anything that day. Anything but escaping her home, escaping her notebooks and journals and correspondence, escaping yet another lecture about her domestic responsibilities.

She had been astonished when the machine, after months of adjustments, calculations and not a little language that would have earned her further hus-62

bandly lectures, abruptly worked.

After that it had all been surprises.

She was fortunate that the future contained people dedicated to the task of looking after stray time travellers!

In less than a hundred years, the world had been transformed. Not beyond all recognition – there were still police – but the machines! Machines everywhere!

When Mr Mintz had come to rescue her, she had been torn between her desire to escape the authorities and her need to examine the machines more closely. He had refused to pull to the side of the road so that she could examine the mechanism that powered his *car*. So she had contented herself with experimenting with the *radio* for the rest of the journey.

His decision to accompany her was a chivalrous one, but now she wished she had not permitted it. Even with the use of Mr Mintz's *PowerBook*, her figures would not be enough to see them home.

If they were trapped in this time and place, it would be the result of her disastrously premature experiment. She did not imagine they would survive long. Through her own impatience, she had escaped one prison only to find herself in another.

She shut her eyes firmly, forcing down the fear. It was as though there was a small voice in the back of her mind, pleading to be let out.

It galled her that the only rescue might be the Doctor. She frowned, pictur-ing him in her mind's eye. There was something behind his patronizing tone and impatience. It was as though he had some urgent, secret mission, and she was an impediment. Interesting.

Something was happening in the hut. Penelope pushed her eye to the tiny hole. Two of the villagers were bringing something inside.

She heard Joel exhale in lieu of exclaiming. It was Kame, the samurai, evidently injured.

The villagers moved around the body, speaking in low voices. With a jolt, Penelope realized the man was dead. With the suicidal courage his caste displayed, she would not have been surprised if he had attacked the whole of the invading force.

The villagers lifted the body. Joel and Penelope looked up at the same moment as something heavy was placed on the lid of the trunk. They looked at each other.

Penelope decided that if she was not released shortly she would begin to scream at the top of her lungs.

Outside, the shouting began.

'Flying heads!'

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Chris sat up. He had been sitting with his chin cupped in his palm, staring at a wall of the house.

The guards at the door were standing up. 'Flying heads!' shouted someone again. He could hear a commotion outside. Chris got up and went to the door.

There were heads flying through the village. Samurai and peasants were running around as the heads zoomed past huts and houses. Some of them chased people for a few feet before soaring off to skim over the roofs. One was spiralling lazily around a tree trunk.

The Doctor was still busy with the *Times* crossword. 'What is it?' he said, pencilling in an answer.

'There's a bunch of heads flying around out there,' said Chris.

'Oh,' said the Doctor. 'What kind?'

A samurai ran into the house, sword drawn. He waved his arms. 'Flying heads!' he shouted, and ran back out.

'You know,' said Chris. 'Just heads. Of the flying variety.'

The Doctor folded away his piece of newspaper and tucked his pencil behind his ear. He walked over to the doorway.

One of the guards turned, noticing that his prisoners were getting restless.

The Doctor told him, 'I just want the answers to two questions. Are these the demons you were, er, escaping?'

'No,' said the samurai. 'Those were *tengu* – these are *rokoro-kubi*.'

‘Thank you,’ said the Doctor. The samurai turned his attention back to the chaos in the village. One head was skimming through a flock of yelling children.

Chris asked, ‘What was the other question?’

‘An Egyptian deity,’ he said. ‘Two letters.’

‘They look like robots,’ said Chris. ‘What’s a *rokoro-kubi*?’

‘A flying head,’ said the Doctor. ‘A sort of vampire that can detach its head, anyway. You’re right, they are robots.’

‘Dual spy cameras,’ said Chris. ‘We’re being observed.’

‘And not by someone with a sense of subtlety.’

The heads were coming together now, forming a sort of swarm above the central square of the village. They bobbed in a loose cloud, perhaps three dozen of them. When they weren’t moving so quickly, it was easy to see that they were spherical drones, metal and plastic faces formed by components and the double lenses.

They buzzed and twittered at one another. Tête à tête,’ said the Doctor.

Chris groaned.

As one, they descended towards the shrine.

‘Oh dear,’ said Chris and the Doctor.

After that, things really started to get interesting.

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7

Coffin cure

Joel wriggled his shoulders again, wishing he could get the crick out of his neck.

Penelope was getting very antsy. Either that or she had a cramp in her leg.

Joel hoped she didn’t have claustrophobia. There hadn’t been time for

her to protest when the villagers had pushed the pair of them into the box.

He remembered the first time he'd seen her, a dishevelled madwoman in a police lockup in Swindon. She had summoned what was left of her resolve, looked him in the eye and told him that she came from the year 1883. When he had believed her, she'd nearly fallen over.

She was all determination and no experience. They had a lot of people like that in the railroad these days. After thirteen years Joel was familiar with five local alien races and had met two dozen, maybe three dozen more. Whenever they got someone new on staff – a ufologist or psychic who'd tracked them down, more often than not – Joel loved introducing them to whatever aliens were being harboured in Little Caldwell, and watching their brains shut down with amazement.

He'd never seen Penelope achieve that deer-in-headlights state. She was too curious to let anything really bamboozle her. He could imagine her up a tree in the Amazon, ruthlessly tweezering new species of scorpion into labelled boxes. Or in the appliances section of a big department store, going berserk with a magnifying glass and a bunch of screwdrivers.

He stuck his eye up against the hole again. No one. The villagers had left when the commotion had started outside. It had been, what, fifteen minutes?

Twenty minutes?

Penelope risked a whisper. 'Did you hear something?'

'No,' said Joel. 'It's gone much too quiet.'

'Maybe we should get out of this box.'

They both looked up at the lid. Joel said, 'Let's give it another few minutes.'

The shouting started again.

* * *

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The heads had spent about three minutes inside the shrine. They must

have been jammed in there earlobe to earlobe. At last they came floating out in single file, twittering, rose above the village, and drifted away like neglected balloons.

Chris murmured, 'Maybe the samurai will be too freaked out to check out the shrine.'

Captain Hadankyou was standing in the square, his *katana* still drawn after the sudden invasion. He shouted orders to his scattered warriors and stomped across to the shrine.

'Maybe,' said Chris, 'they won't notice anything unusual.'

There was a brilliant flash of light inside the shrine. Captain Hadankyou came flying out, backwards, landing in an undignified position in the dirt.

One of their guards jumped down and ran towards his fallen commander.

The Doctor tried to head towards the shrine, but the other guard shouted,

'Stand still!' The Time Lord fidgeted, trying to see what was going on.

'Power discharge?' said Chris. 'If that thing is a satellite. . . '

Captain Hadankyou had obviously decided that a full-scale assault on the shrine was the only honourable step to be taken. He shrilled orders to his men, who surrounded him, weapons drawn.

'Five credits on the pod,' said Chris.

'No bet,' said the Doctor.

The mass assault on the shrine was hampered by the fact that only one person could get through the door at a time. Undaunted, the samurai pushed their way into the small building, all trying to be first.

Chris realized his hair was blowing around. He pushed it out of his face.

'Looks like we're in for nasty weather,' he said.

'Hmm,' said the Doctor. 'I think the pod has finally noticed all the attention it's getting.'

‘You know what?’ said Chris. ‘I bet it’s a sentient machine.’

‘Now *that* I’ll take you up on,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m leaning towards a cun-ningly disguised super-weapon myself.’

‘Could be a sentient super-weapon,’ said Chris.

Outside the shrine, one of the samurai yelled as he was lifted into the air by an invisible hand. A group of the warriors found themselves being pushed back from the shrine by a force they couldn’t see.

The Doctor said, ‘All those with psychokinesis, raise my hand.’

Chris asked, ‘Projected energy fields?’

‘Perhaps,’ said the Doctor.

Lightning jumped out of nowhere and struck a nearby tree. A tree jumped out of the ground and struck a nearby samurai. Chris realized that the vil-66

lagers were watching the proceedings from a safe distance, the little crowd forming a semicircle. Confident in their god’s powers.

The warriors who had gone into the shrine emerged at a run. One was afire, his banner burning. He rolled hard across the ground, putting out the flames.

Captain Hadankyou shouted more orders, and his samurai formed a line opposite the shrine.

‘Standoff,’ said Chris.

‘Mmm.’ The Doctor saw his companion’s frown and sheepishly put his crossword back in his pocket. ‘They’ll probably strut about briefly to re-establish their credentials, and then make a very rapid tactical withdrawal. I don’t expect anything else of interest will happen.’

Penelope and Joel heard the noise at the same moment. They froze in their awkward positions.

Someone, thought Penelope, must have come into the hut without their realizing. Someone was moving around out there. Up there. Perhaps – hopefully – someone had come to take Kame’s body away.

Mr Mintz reached out and grasped her arm. Penelope froze in place, surprised by the gesture.

She stayed perfectly still as someone removed the body from the trunk's lid.

She even stayed still when she heard them leaving, and was possessed by a violent urge to push open the lid of the trunk and emerge, raving, back into the light.

When Kame came roaring back out of the hut, sword flashing in the light, it was the straw that broke the camel's back. The Plum samurai broke ranks and scattered, shouting.

The villagers watched in awed silence as their recently deceased protector stormed across the square. 'Come on, you cowards!' he yelled. 'Who's for a fight?'

The two samurai jumped down from the veranda, forgetting about Chris and the Doctor. Their courage thinned out when they got closer to the enemy and saw it was the man their captain had cut down that morning.

Captain Hadankyou made a half-hearted foray towards Kame, as though to get a better look. Even from the veranda, Chris could see the great splash of blood on the front of the samurai's armour, the flecks of red across his cheek and jaw.

Chris turned to the Doctor. The Time Lord was transfixed, watching Kame's progress with his mouth hanging open, the pencil hanging down from his bottom lip.

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Two of the villagers had broken from their reverie, and were pulling open the gate. The Plum samurai backed towards it, keeping their eyes on Kame.

One by one, they went outside the village wall, the captain last. The two villagers closed the gate behind them without a word.

Kame struck the gate with the hilt of his sword and bellowed, 'Good riddance! We don't need noisy fellows like you here!'

He turned back to look around the astonished village, and let out a great laugh.

The Doctor made a beeline for the shrine. Kame was wandering through the square, surrounded by villagers touching his armour and

hair to see if he was real.

‘Kuriisu-san!’ roared the samurai, spotting the Adjudicator. Chris stepped down and walked towards him.

The deep wound in Kame’s throat was gone, except for a ragged red line.

‘You look great for a dead man,’ said Chris.

Kame laughed. ‘It is Kannon’s blessing,’ he said. ‘When those barbarians tried to desecrate her shrine, I heard her calling me back from the land of the dead.’ He clasped Chris’s shoulder. ‘At first I was reluctant, having died so well, but then I realized this would be an opportunity to die again for her honour!’

Chris turned. The Doctor had emerged unscathed from the shrine. ‘Things have quietened down again,’ he said, ‘but who knows how long it will last?

Where are Penelope and Joel?’

An elderly couple glanced at each other. ‘We must go and let them out!’

said the woman, and the pair scurried back to their hut.

‘ *Kaimon!* ’

Everyone turned to look at the gate. ‘Open up!’ shouted the voice again.

Chris sighed. Kame’s hand went to the hilt of his sword. The Doctor tucked his pencil behind his ear.

8

Waiting for the demons

Aoi looked up at the crude gate of Hekison village. He stroked his horse’s mane, and the animal quietened. He wished he could soothe away his own apprehension as easily.

They’d taken shelter in the forest, once Aoi’s father was sure the demons were not following. They’d taken turns on watch, but Aoi

found himself half asleep almost until dawn, every chittering bird and snapping twig the sound of an approaching demon. When he did sleep, he dreamt of the foreigner's eyes.

After that mad ride through the blackness it had been impossible to trace their steps. Kiiro had snorted, 'We won't find the foreigners again. The demons rescued them or the demons ate them. Forget them.'

'Then we will proceed to Hekison.' Father took out his map. 'First we'll stop in the town of Toshi for supplies. It's not far out of the way. We can still reach Hekison by midday.'

It was in Toshi that the messenger had found them. Aoi remembered him from Gufuu's palace, one of the daimyo's pages. The young man had jumped down from his horse as they stood outside an inn. He had bowed to Aoi's father. 'I was sent to find you,' he panted. 'There's a message from the daimyo.'

' *Kaimon!* ' shouted Aoi's father again, bringing the young samurai back to the present.

The gate opened an inch. The little man who called himself Isha put his head around the great wooden door.

'Hello again,' he said. He slipped out, and the gate thumped shut behind him.

Aoi's father dismounted and bowed low. The Doctor returned the bow.

'I have an invitation from Gufuu Kocho, daimyo of Han, Daini and Sanban Districts,' said Aoi's father. He presented the scroll with both hands. The Doctor took it in both hands and bowed. He opened the message and read.

Aoi watched the strange little man. He remembered those odd eyes, changing colour as they lulled him. If there was devilry anywhere here, it was in those eyes.

'Can I bring a friend?' said the Doctor.

Penelope had been out of the trunk for half an hour now. She didn't feel as if she was free. She felt walled in, trapped in the dark.

Perhaps part of it came from the events that had taken place during their confinement: Mr Cwej had given them a quick precis. She was surrounded on all sides by the bewildering, with no way back to her own ordinary world.

Now she, a stiff-necked Mr Mintz and a frowning Mr Cwej were waiting outside the shrine, eyes on the gate, while the Doctor concluded his negotiations.

Kame the samurai was practising sword strokes in the village square, watched by an assortment of small children and young men. He seemed filled with vigour, even electricity. With new life.

Penelope shook her head. 'He cannot have been resurrected,' she said aloud.

'It is impossible. He must not have been as badly injured as you thought.'

Mr Cwej shrugged. 'He was very dead. And now he's alive.'

'Psychic healing?' said Mr Mintz. 'Possession? Alien symbiotes?'

'No,' said Mr Cwej. 'I think he just came back to life.'

The three of them turned to look at the shrine.

'What is that thing? Whatever can it be?' breathed Penelope.

'Whatever it is,' said Mr Mintz, 'I think it likes us.'

Penelope shivered. 'Think about it,' Joel said. 'It saved the Doctor, it scared off the samurai, it somehow healed Kame. . . The villagers are right. It *is* protecting us.'

'But why?' said Mr Cwej, his frown deepening.

The gate creaked open again, and the Doctor slipped back into the village.

The headman had been waiting for him. They conferred for a few moments.

The Doctor came up the hill towards the other time travellers, navigating around Kame and his small crowd of admirers.

'Right,' said the Doctor. 'Gufuu Kocho has had a bit of a change of

heart.

Now he wants us round for tea.'

'Ah,' said Mr Mintz. 'The honeymoon phase.'

'Are we going?' said Mr Cwej

'I am,' said the Doctor. 'I want you to stay here, in charge of things.'

'Oh no!' said Mr Cwej.

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor. 'I'm to pop over to Gufuu's court for a friendly chat about local politics and not meddling in things one does not understand.

I need you here to keep an eye on Schrödinger's Cat.' He nodded at the shrine.

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Mr Mintz said, 'Doctor, can I come with you?'

The Doctor peered up at him with such intensity that Mr Mintz almost jumped. 'All right,' he said, after a moment. 'Get your things together – we're off in ten minutes.'

Mr Mintz beamed and ran up towards the house. Mr Cwej watched him go, looking forlorn.

Chris put his head around the door of the house. The Doctor was fishing through his little satchel of packages.

'Listen,' said the Adjudicator. 'Is this really a good idea?'

'Gufuu Kocho wants more information about the so-called *kami*,' said the Doctor. 'If I tell him the right things, he might lose interest in it.'

'No, I meant leaving me here in charge.' He took a deep breath. 'I don't think I can do this.'

'Nonsense,' said the Doctor. 'You've handled far wore difficult situations than this.'

'That was before.'

'Before what?'

‘Look,’ said Chris, ‘I don’t want to let you down. Why don’t you take me with you? Penelope and Joel can keep an eye on things here, and the village is pretty well protected.’

‘One of us should be with the pod at all times,’ said the Doctor. ‘The headman has far too much faith in the thing. Joel’s very experienced with the uncanny, but only in one small area and time. And Penelope’s overwhelmed.

It has to be you.’

‘What if I freeze up again?’

‘I wouldn’t leave you behind if I didn’t think you could manage.’ The Doctor tucked a small packet into his pocket and headed for the door.

‘Before you go. . . ’ said the Adjudicator helplessly. The Doctor turned back to look at him. ‘Kame,’ said Chris. ‘Do you know what happened to him?’

‘No,’ said the Doctor.

‘Well, don’t you think you should talk to him at least?’

‘Would that I had time,’ said the Doctor hurriedly. ‘Right at the moment, people coming back to life are the least of our troubles. It’s people being killed that I’m worried about.’

‘So what are you going to give the daimyo?’ said Chris. ‘Not jelly babies this time.’

‘Tea,’ said the Doctor. ‘I’ll see you in a day or so.’

That afternoon the farmers went back to their neglected fields. Kame patrolled the surrounding lands on horseback, spoiling for a fight. The headman, Son-71

chou, posted lookouts all over the place, even enlisting some of the children.

If any more samurai showed up, this time they’d have plenty of warning to get everyone inside the gates.

Chris wondered just how much protection those gates would be against something more than samurai. Anachronistic weaponry, for example. Or demons.

He spent an hour walking around the village, taking stock of its primitive defences. There were hills behind and a river to the east, offering some protection from soldiers on foot or horseback. The pine forest was a problem, offering a place to hide attackers – or villagers? He decided to send a few farmers out to look for a good bolt-hole in the woods, just in case. With provisions.

The fence went right around the village, a rough mass of tree trunks and thick branches, tied together with dried vines and odds and ends of rope.

According to Sonchou, it had helped repel a small band of brigands a few years ago, the farmers stabbing up at the attackers with sharpened bamboo poles as they tried to scramble over the top. He wondered if they still had the poles.

Chris sat on a step outside the shrine, chin resting on his fist. They could make a few preparations now, but the truth was they didn't have a cat's chance in hell – not against a decent number of samurai, and definitely not against demons. Aliens. Whoever.

What they really needed was a stone fence. Of course, it might be a bit difficult to whip one up this afternoon, in time for the next lot of armed madmen.

The samurai – Butterfly and Plum – wouldn't be deterred by the various shocks they'd had. That pod was just going to attract more and more attention.

He sighed. It was just one catastrophe after another. At least so far no one had died, except Kame, sort of.

Oh great, now he was counting corpses. Great.

He realized that Penelope was standing next to the well, watching him –

no, she was looking up at the shrine behind him, wringing her hands. She was doing pretty well, thought Chris, for someone who'd chucked herself in the deep end of time travel. She hadn't died of future shock, or past shock, or freaked out or anything. Maybe it hadn't had time to sink in yet.

She noticed him watching her and stepped up. 'I wish to make myself useful,' she said. 'At the very least I can help defend the village.'

‘If we have to,’ said Chris. The Doctor would be looking for some way to avoid fighting. Something really clever that no one else would have thought of. . . He sighed. ‘Where’s your time machine?’

‘Still hidden in the forest,’ said Penelope.

‘You’d better get some villagers to help you bring it inside the fence,’ he said. ‘In case we do get attacked.’

‘It won’t be any help as a means of escape,’ she said sadly. ‘I have attempted repairs, but it appears to be defunct.’

‘Maybe we can think of something,’ said Chris. ‘Or maybe when the Doctor gets back, he can take a look at it.’

‘He will only poke fun at it.’ Penelope sat down on the well beside him, glumly cupping her chin in one hand. ‘If Joel’s machines seem miraculous to me, I cannot imagine what the far century from which you and the Doctor come must be like.’

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Chris. ‘I mean, attitudes and lifestyles are different in different times, and the technology is always different, but people are still people. I mean, in your time there are very poor people, and very rich people, and lots of immigrants doing rotten jobs, right? Do you still have slavery?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Oh yeah, that’s the century before, right? Us neither, anyway. Maybe, after all this is over, we should go there. To the thirtieth century. You can meet my folks. I haven’t visited for. . . it must be more than a year now.’

‘Do you miss them?’

‘Yeah,’ said Chris, and suddenly discovered an overwhelming pang of home-sickness he hadn’t been aware of before. ‘Oh, yeah. What about you?’

‘Not at all,’ said Penelope. ‘I feel certain my husband misses me. He will have difficulty working out the household expenses. He cannot add for toffee.’

‘What about – do you have any children?’

‘Our son died when he was less than a year old,’ said Penelope distantly.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Chris, which always sounded so stupid, but everyone always said it anyway.

‘That was three years ago. I have been very busy since then.’ Penelope shook herself. ‘It would be a great pleasure to visit your century. But would the Doctor approve?’

Chris hadn’t thought of that. ‘I guess so,’ he said. ‘Why wouldn’t he?’

‘What if I returned to 1883 and published a paper about my future journey?’

she said. ‘I don’t dare to meddle in past history, but what about the affairs of my own time?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Chris. ‘These things are hard to predict, if you’re not a Time Lord. But would anybody take you seriously?’

‘Of course they wouldn’t,’ she said. ‘I doubt I will be able to convince anyone I have made this journey, let alone its extraordinary details. But I feel I am ready to believe anything. Even turning back time to bring the dead back to life.’

* * *

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The samurai had moved at a gallop for most of the morning. Around noon they’d stopped by a stream to rest and eat. Joel fell off his horse, found a patch of grass and collapsed on to it.

The Doctor dismounted and stood over him, eclipsing the sunlight. ‘Bury me here,’ groaned Joel. ‘Just dig up the earth and pile it over me.’

‘You’ll be fine,’ said the Doctor. ‘A little saddle-soreness never killed anyone.’

‘I haven’t ridden this much since the Voltranons invaded and set up their internal combustion dampening field,’ murmured Joel. He flung his arms over his eyes. ‘Lord take me now.’

The Doctor smiled and sat down beside him, on his knees, Japanese style.

Joel peeked at him from beneath his arm. It was surprisingly hard to get his head around the fact that the Doctor and Chris were not any older. Especially Chris. Understanding it in your mind was one thing, but getting your hindbrain to accept it, after all those eons of life in linear time. . .

Maybe the Doctor did look a little olden Not so much in human ways, new wrinkles and grey hairs. But when his eyes caught yours, you got that dizzying sense of *age*, of just how big the gap of years was. Joel thought of the Doctor he'd met in 1987, and wondered how much longer this incarnation had to go.

Did Time Lords feel their biological clocks ticking?

As for the human race. . . Joel rolled his head to look at the three samurai, watching them from a little distance. The kid met his eyes for a moment, and looked away.

'Was it really a good idea to bring your laptop computer?'

'It's been treated worse than this,' Joel told the Doctor.

'No, I meant, back to the sixteenth century.'

'Come on,' said Joel. 'None of these guys are going to learn the secrets of the silicon chip from it.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor. The samurai were making a fire. 'What other anachronisms have you brought along?'

Joel lowered his arms. 'Nothing. The ol' anachronometer,' he said, indicating his watch. 'And my glasses. I guess you could count my clothes. Why?'

'I was just wondering. How's your Japanese etiquette?'

'Non-existent,' said Joel, watching the Doctor, who was rummaging in his pockets. 'Maybe you'd better leave me outside when you talk to the Emperor.'

'Daimyo. Perhaps,' said the Doctor. He produced a chocolate bar from his jacket pocket. 'Though if we don't teach you how to eat a Japanese meal properly, you're going to be living on these for a while.'

He threw the chocolate to Joel. 'Cheers, mate,' said Joel, in his best British accent. 'You guys at least had time to do your homework. I

didn't know where or when the heck we'd end up.'

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'I remember what that was like.' The Doctor smiled. 'How goes the cleaning-up-after-me business?'

'You know. Keeps you off the streets. Met Tegan Jovanka.'

'Oh,' said the Doctor.

'Yeah, she misses you too.' Joel unwrapped the chocolate bar. 'The usual crop of invasions – the Cybermen were the worst of it. The bloody Ra'ashetani had another go in 1988. Eighty-eight was a bastard of a year, for some reason. . . and the government's so cagey about what it knows about extraterrestrials these days. A decade ago there were leaks everywhere. Now everything's under wraps.'

The Doctor sat cross-legged and planted his chin on his palm, looking glum.

Joel wondered what was going through his mind. 'Young Chris is a bit of a mess,' he said.

The Doctor glanced at him. 'He's resilient. He'll cope.'

'Ah,' said Joel. 'You left him behind for a reason.'

'I never do anything without a reason,' said the Doctor, 'or at least a rhyme.'

'He's been through one hell of a lot in the last couple of years. He, ah, told me about Roz. And Professor Shaw. Must have been rough on him.'

The Doctor didn't answer. Joel took a bite out of the chocolate bar. 'So, what's the plan?'

'I try to persuade Gufuu to abandon his interest in the pod,' said the Doctor,

'while I investigate the local politics.'

And Chris gets to wing it on his own for a while. 'Why did they invite you to dinner? Kind of a one-eighty after trying to lop your head off.'

'I dropped Gufuu Kocho a line,' said the Doctor. 'Actually, I left a

message with Kadoguchi-roshi. When we didn't return after a day, he would have sent it on to the daimyo.'

'"I have information that might be to your advantage"?'

'I threw in a lot of my official titles to let him know I meant business. President of the High Council of Time Lords. Keeper of the Legacy of Rassilon.

Defender of the Laws of Time. Honorary Kang. And so forth.'

Joel's eyes widened. 'You're the President of the Time Lords?'

'No,' said the Doctor, 'but Gufuu doesn't know that. I also gain extra status through being a doctor, of course – that puts me on the same footing as the samurai. I wonder if I can convince Aka-san to lend me some clothes.' He tipped his hat at the samurai's leader, who looked bewildered.

Joel said, 'This is all kind of small-scale for you, isn't it? The Earth's not going to blow up or anything. Unless you know something about that pod that you're not telling.'

'Oh yes,' said the Doctor. 'This is just an adventure. A bit of swordplay, a few jokes, nothing worth taking very seriously.'

'Yeah, but Chris is about ready to burst, and you –' The Doctor glanced at him, and Joel found himself shutting up suddenly.

The Time Lord steepled his fingers. 'Mr Mintz,' he said. 'What do *you* want?'

'Never ask that question,' growled Joel. The Doctor looked at him blankly.

'Er. Anyway, I guess I wanted a chance to strike out on my own. For a while.

I like working for the Admiral. He's still my hero. But thirteen years. . . I wanted an adventure of my own. A bit of swordplay, a few jokes.'

'And what do you think so far?'

Joel shrugged, watching him. 'Nothing worth taking very seriously.'

The daimyo was watching a play when they arrived, just after sunset. Joel wanted to be dazzled by the great castle rising above the courtyard, the reinforced walls, the armoured warriors who watched them and the seated samurai who ignored them, watching the chanting and posturing of the Noh performers. All he could manage was a sort of numb exhaustion and the overwhelming need for a hot bath.

Servants came scurrying out, bowing low as they took the horses and led them to their quarters. The three samurai disappeared as quickly and politely as they could manage. Embarrassed to be seen with the *gaijin*?

A pair of nervous servants lead the Doctor and Joel to a large room in the palace. At first Joel thought it was empty, but then he saw the bedding rolled up in the corner, the low wooden rests for writing or eating.

One of the servants bowed. ‘The daimyo would like to speak with you after you have eaten,’ he said. ‘Let us bring you some supper.’

‘No meat or fish for me, please,’ said the Doctor absently. He was pacing around the room in his socks, as though he was looking for something.

‘Er, thanks,’ said Joel. The servants bowed and went out.

The Doctor finally settled, kneeling on one of the straw mats. He folded his hands, suddenly looking totally serene. It was as though he’d drawn into himself, gathering strength for the confrontation with Gufuu.

‘What did happen to Liz Shaw?’

The Doctor didn’t stir for a moment, his eyes focused on nothing in particular. Joel had been hoping for a bit more of a reaction. The Time Lord murmured, ‘What did Chris tell you?’

‘He said he killed her.’

Now the Doctor looked up, catching Joel with his ancient eyes. ‘Good grief,’

he said. ‘Is that what he really believes?’

‘Uh,’ said Joel, ‘not exactly. He said she died because of him.’

‘Liz’s death wasn’t anyone’s fault. It was just a terrible set of circumstances.’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘She didn’t give him his life so he could spend it feeling guilty.’

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They both looked up. One of the servants was back, carrying a large box.

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor, brightening up. ‘The clothes that make the man.’

‘It’s quiet,’ said Kame.

‘Too quiet,’ said Chris, and then, ‘Argh, I can’t believe I just said that.’

The ronin had insisted on Chris’s dining with him that evening. He had cooked a proper Japanese dinner for them rice, soup and three small main courses – and then spent so much time lecturing Chris on the correct way to eat it that both of their meals had gone cold.

Now they were sitting beside the firepit in Kame’s hut, drinking tea and listening to the night sounds. Penelope was in the house, tinkering with the engine of her time machine, while the village women giggled and watched.

‘Those samurai with the flower on their banners,’ said Chris. ‘Who are they working for?’

‘Those are Umemi’s men,’ said Kame. ‘He and Gufuu Kocho have been skirmishing through the valleys for the last ten years. Neither one ever gets enough of an advantage to destroy the other. One of these days there’s going to be an almighty massacre at one of the two castles. And then we’ll see.’

‘One of the samurai,’ persisted Chris, ‘said they were attacked by *tengu*. I thought those were the little demons that lived in the forests. Not much of a threat to a war party.’

‘Oh, you should never underestimate the *tengu*,’ said Kame. ‘They’re cun-ning little goblins, and clever with a sword. People who’ve tried tricking them have ended up falling out of trees or into cold rivers. If the samurai gave the *tengu* offence, they’d have known about it pretty quickly.’

‘So how will I know one of these guys if I see them?’

‘Well,’ said Kame, ‘if you see anything up a pine tree with hands and a beak, either be damned polite to it or give it a wide berth!’ He laughed.

‘Sonchou-san says you came from Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery. Is that old dog Kadoguchi-roshi still there?’

‘Yes,’ said Chris.

‘We called him old dog,’ added Kame, ‘because he would bite you with a riddle or a question, and he wouldn’t let go until you solved it.’

‘You were a monk?’

‘Yes. A very awful one. I got tired of trying to solve the same *koan*, day in, day out. And I missed sake!’

‘What *koan* was it?’ said Chris, hopefully.

‘Nansen’s Cat,’ said Kame. ‘Don’t tell me the old dog gave you one as well.’

‘It was a different one. Kosen’s student.’

‘What’s that one?’

77

‘Kosen the calligrapher keeps trying to write something, and every time he does it, his student says it’s rubbish. When his student steps outside for a moment, he dashes off the phrase – and the student says it’s a masterpiece.’

Kame nodded knowingly. ‘Well?’ said Chris. ‘Can’t you even give me a hint?

I’ve been going nuts trying to work it out!’

‘Don’t try so hard. It’ll come to you.’

Chris made a face. ‘You wouldn’t happen to know the story of the *preta* and the snowman?’

Kame drained the last of his tea. ‘If we weren’t on duty, I’d suggest we change to sake,’ he muttered. ‘Yes, that’s about Hungry Ghost Castle,

up in the mountains. It's a real place, I've been there.'

'So have I,' said Chris.

'It's haunted now. The ghosts of travellers who fell prey to the *jiki-ketsu-gaki*. I can remember when everyone avoided that pass in the mountains. You had to go around the long way – it took three extra days.'

'What is a *jiki-ketsu-gaki*? Some kind of vampire?'

'There are *pretas* which eat flesh,' said Kame, 'and *pretas* which drink blood.

She was one of the latter. Reincarnated as a demon, a ghost. Unable to move on to her next life.'

'A vampire,' said Chris.

'She would offer hospitality to travellers in her Castle, but they never emerged alive. The head monk at Doa-no-naiheya Monastery fashioned a man out of snow, and recited sutras over it for three days and three nights until it took on the semblance of life. What are you smiling about?'

'It's a good story,' said Chris. 'Go on.'

'The monk instructed him to go to the Castle, and allow the *jiki-ketsu-gaki* to drink from him. She would be drinking melted snow, of course, instead of blood, a trick which would destroy her. So the snowman did as he was told.

She welcomed him into the gates of Hungry Ghost Castle and bade him sit next to her fire. He came in, but he wouldn't sit next to the fire!'

'He let her drink his blood,' breathed Chris.

'Well,' said Kame, 'he got into the bed he was offered, and pretended to be asleep until he heard the hungry ghost coming to drink from him. But after she'd taken a few mouthfuls, he got up, jumped out of the window, and ran down the mountainside!'

'He ran away?'

'Now, the head monk was returning to the monastery after a visit, and was amazed to discover a snowman halfway up the mountain, as

though it had been made by flying children! Suddenly he realized it was his snowman. “You must go back,” said the monk, “and finish your mission.”

78

‘The snowman protested, “But Roshi, won’t I die if enough of me melts away?”

‘The head monk said, “Perhaps you will. I cannot force you to obey me. You must decide whether or not to return.”’

‘He ran away,’ said Chris again.

‘In the end, the snowman trudged back up the mountain, and went back into the Castle. A month passed, and nothing more was heard of the snowman or the vampire. So the head monk sent a group of fighting monks up to the Castle, to see what had happened.

‘They found the body of the *jiki-ketsu-gaki*, quite frozen. But of the snowman there was no sign. The head monk once again recited sutras, and had a vision: the hungry ghost had slain the snowman, but, as his reward for destroying the monster, he had been reincarnated as a human being.’

‘He ran away,’ said Chris. ‘I can’t believe it.’

‘Facing a human foe takes one kind of courage,’ said Kame, ‘but facing the supernatural takes a very different kind. Even I, ferocious and bold *bushi* that I am, might think twice about battling a monster like that.’

‘Tea,’ said Chris.

Kame poured Chris another cup. The Adjudicator bowed automatically.

‘Why would you give someone tea?’

‘Eh?’

‘As a present.’

‘Only at funerals,’ said Kame, ‘because of the white flowers.’

‘Kame?’

‘Yes, Kuriisu-san?’

‘When you died. . . where did you go?’

‘Ah. . . ’ Kame put down his teacup. ‘I dreamt I was walking along a long, long road, towards the sun going down between two mountains, and then distantly I heard a woman calling my name. Over and over, louder and louder.

I did not wish to turn from my journey, but in the end I had to turn around, and find out what the voice wanted. And then I discovered myself on top of that old bamboo trunk, with an aching back and an aching neck, and a raging appetite.’

Chris frowned. It was a very ordinary near-death experience. Or perhaps it was just Kame’s way of putting that experience into terms he could deal with.

‘Don’t worry, my brave lad,’ said Kame. ‘If you want to find out what’s on the other side of death, remain a samurai you’ll find out soon enough!’

It was late. Gufuu Kocho, daimyo of the three districts, would much rather have been in bed, but his curiosity was keeping him up. Who were these 79

foreigners? Were they even human? And what could they tell him about the *kami*?

The old daimyo sat down on the wooden stool, flicking out his sleeves. His swordbearer, a young page, was doing his best not to yawn. Gufuu smiled to himself The lad wasn’t quite used to the hours kept by war.

Gufuu gestured to a servant, who brought him his pipe, and to another, who bowed and knelt to open the sliding door.

The foreign doctor stepped into the room. Gufuu was instantly struck by his bearing. He wore a black skirt and coat that accentuated the pallor of his skin and the white kimono beneath. Two swords were thrust through his waist sash – or rather, physicians’ scabbards, probably filled with medicines and calligraphy equipment instead of steel. The Doctor carried a small package in his hands, wrapped in silk.

He knelt before the dais and bowed low. Gufuu said, ‘Thank you for accept-ing my invitation.’

The Doctor bowed again. ‘Please allow me to present you with this

gift.' He put the package on to the wooden stand beside him. The daimyo took a puff on his small pipe and gestured, and a servant picked up the stand and brought the gift to him.

'Go on, open it,' said the Doctor. 'Please don't stand on ceremony.'

The daimyo unwrapped the silk, revealing a small package carefully wrapped in handmade paper. He opened the paper.

'Ah,' he said, putting aside his pipe. 'You have made a careful study of our customs, Isha-san.' The foreigner bowed. 'But please allow me to correct a small matter of etiquette. Tea is given only at unhappy occasions, such as funerals.'

'It was entirely intentional,' said the Doctor. The daimyo gave him a sharp look. 'Please forgive my rudeness, but if you do not change your course of action, you will bring a great deal of sorrow to yourself and the people you rule.'

'I see,' said Gufuu coolly. He gestured to a servant, who scuttled over. 'Will you take a cup with me?'

'Of course. Thank you.' The servant picked up the package and went out to make the tea.

'Now then,' said Gufuu, settling himself. 'You had better say what you came here to say.'

The Doctor inclined his head. 'My lord,' he began, 'you want the *kami* that fell to earth near Hekison village. But you don't know what it is, or what advantage it might bring you. Isn't that right?'

The daimyo gestured for the Doctor to continue. The foreigner said, 'It's true that the *kami* does have strange powers. It used them to fight off a band 80

of samurai sent by your rival.'

'Then it is mine,' interrupted Gufuu. 'That land belongs to me, not Umemi.'

'This brings me to my next point,' said the Doctor. 'Not only will the *kami* oppose you if you try to move it from Hekison village, but your most dangerous rival now knows about it.' His eyes were intense with sincerity. 'The superior warrior knows when not to fight, as well as when to fight. Is it worth going to war over this unknown object?'

Gufuu stroked his beard for a few minutes, considering, while the Doctor waited. ‘Next time I won’t send three samurai,’ said the daimyo, at last. ‘I’ll send a troop.’

‘Don’t you see?’ insisted the Doctor. ‘The more soldiers you send, the more the situation at your border will escalate – and the more resistance you’ll meet from the *kami* itself. Not to mention the villagers – you might risk a peasant uprising. Let your rival waste his time and effort trying to retrieve it.’

Gufuu considered for a moment. ‘What is your stake in all of this?’ he demanded. ‘Why this show of loyalty from a man from some far-off country?’

‘If there’s a war,’ said the Doctor, ‘thousands will suffer and die.’

‘ *Bushi* are devoted to suffering and dying,’ said Gufuu.

‘Farmers and craftsmen aren’t,’ said the Doctor. ‘And neither are women and children. Let them have their idol, my lord. It’s of no use to you.’

Chris knelt in Sonchou-san’s drawing room, waiting for the headman to receive him. Mrs Sonchou had given him a pair of slippers to replace his shoes, but his feet were still cold and his legs were being squashed by his weight. He shrugged and shifted for the third time. Wishing he was comfortable Wishing the Doctor was there.

He heard a stifled giggle, and looked up to see a single eye peering at him through a sliding door that had beer opened an inch. A second face appeared above the first, and then both disappeared, pushing the door closed. Sonchou’s grandkids. He must be about the weirdest thing they’d ever seen. Except maybe the flying heads.

He thought about Kame and his indifference to dying. It must be easy to be nonchalant about it when you’d cheated death. But Kame had been just as recklessly stoical about it before his resurrection.

Chris turned it over in his mind. This whole samurai thing about death must be so handy for the daimyo – all that emphasis on loyalty, being ready to die for your sovereign lord. All that shame hanging over your head and ready to be used to punish you if you didn’t live up to *bushido*. Kame had no choice but to attack those warriors head-on.

There were plenty of cowards and traitors, despite the way of the warrior.

It was macho, militaristic nonsense.

81

And yet. . .

Chris remembered the first time he had realized he was going to die someday. When you were a kid you didn't think about it. You knew it in an abstract, vague way, but you didn't *know* it.

He had been playing basketball at the time. He was fourteen, already the tallest kid in his class, pounding up and down the court with an evil grin and the ball thumping up and down in front of him. He remembered the echoes of running and shouting in the high-ceilinged gym, the feel of his hair sticking to his forehead and the back of his neck.

He didn't know why a basketball game would make him think about death.

The chain of thought was lost to him now – too many years ago. But he remembered the feeling, kind of in his stomach and his head at the same time, as he wondered what it would be like to go up to Heaven. It wasn't scary so much as *weird*. Knowing that *it was going to happen*, no matter what.

You didn't think about that stuff when you were actually about to be killed.

That was different, your body reacting to the threat the way it had been programmed by those millions of years of evolution. It was more likely to pop up when you were trying to get to sleep at three in the morning.

Because if you did stop to think about it, you'd just freeze up, and kneel there on the cold ground. Kneel there, unable to do what you needed to do – *you* bastard, *you could have killed me* – while death opened one of her thousand doors and –

One of the sliding paper doors opened. Chris flinched so hard that he nearly fell over.

Sonchou-san and his wife came into the room. Chris took his hands off his thighs and put them on the straw mat, bowing. 'After all this excitement, it's good to have a moment to talk with you,' said Sonchou, returning the bow.

‘Do please stay for as long as you can.’

Sonchou-san knelt on the other side of the low table, while his wife knelt down beside them. ‘Please have some tea,’ she said.

‘Thank you.’ Chris smiled. She poured him a cup of the watery green stuff.

He was about to pick up the cup with both hands when he remembered that his host was supposed to drink first.

‘Sonchou-san,’ he said, ‘I need to talk to you about Kannon. Or whatever it is up there in the shrine.’

The headman said nothing, bowing his head to his wife as she poured his tea. Chris went on, ‘So long as the pod is here, it’s going to attract trouble.

Both daimyo are going to keep on sending soldiers, until you find yourself right in the middle of a small war.’

Sonchou sipped his tea. ‘You are right, Kuriisu-san,’ he said. ‘But Kannon herself drove them away. They fear her magical powers.’

‘But don’t you see,’ said Chris, ‘it’s those powers they want. The more miracles she performs, the more determined they’re going to get. She doesn’t belong here.’

‘Then why did she come here? Why heal me, protect us?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Chris. ‘Maybe she – or whatever the pod is – really does want to help you. Or maybe it’s got something else in mind. . . But while it’s here you and your people won’t be safe.’

‘Are you saying we should allow one of the daimyo to take her from us?’

‘No,’ said Chris, ‘that can’t be right. . . ’

‘Then what do you believe we should do?’

Chris hesitated. ‘I don’t know, Sonchou-san. I just. . . we have to do something. What do you think?’ Goddess, he sounded like an idiot!

‘I think we should trust in her,’ said the headman. ‘I think we should

have faith in her, and not be afraid.'

Chris didn't know how to answer that. Sonchou-san said softly, 'For as long as I have been alive, we have been their victims. Our crops have been taken as taxes, our young men as soldiers, our women as spoils of war. This village has been partly destroyed twice, once by fire set by soldiers, once by a pitched battle. Now, at long last, we have something as powerful as the lords and their retainers – more powerful than them.' He looked Chris deep in the eye.

'Do not ask us to give it up.'

Chris found himself at the back of the village. He looked up at the fence, putting a hand to it, as though checking it one more time.

Behind him, the village was sleeping. Safely enclosed by its fence, safely watched over by. . . its god. Or something.

Chris sat down, leaning forward until he was looking through the fence into the darkness. He did something he had not done for a very long time.

'Hello Goddess,' he whispered. 'I need help.'

He stopped, looking around, as though suddenly embarrassed that someone might be listening. There was no one there.

He started again. 'You must have had something in mind when you sent me to travel with the Doctor. You wanted me to be there, in all those different times and places. . . and I've been trying to do what you want. Fulfil my Adjudicator's oath. And be a hero.'

He rested his forehead against a log in the fence, rough, dry wood against his skin. 'Only I'm not a hero. I guess you know that now. I don't know what I'm doing here. I thought this was just going to be an adventure. That's what the Doctor said, but he's. . . you know what he's like. There's always a deeper meaning.'

He took a deep breath. 'I can't do this. I can't do this any more. I can't do it.'

There was no answer. Chris said, 'Look, Goddess, I know I promised. I promised to enforce justice and uphold fairness and all of it. But I was wrong.

I'm not up to the job. Let me off the hook. Get the Doctor back here where he belongs, looking after everyone. I promise I'll just get him to drop me off somewhere where I won't be able to screw things up.'

No answer. Not from inside or outside.

'OK. I know that's pretty pathetic. I'm feeling pretty pathetic. OK, I'm not good enough, I found that out in Turkey, and you know it, so what do you want me to do? If anything goes wrong, it's your fault!' he hissed into the silence. 'Not mine! It's up to you what happens here! Whether there's Justice or not! You, not me! Do you hear me?' No answer. 'Do you hear me?'

But there was no answer, because he was alone.

He got up. In the moonlight, the village looked tiny. He sighed, and started making his way back down to the house.

He turned back for a moment. 'Oh,' he said, 'by the way why *did* Kosen's pupil call that scribble a masterpiece?'

84

In Penelope's dream

It was autumn.

She was in a Japanese garden, surrounded by trees and rocks, randomly placed to suggest the wilderness.

She wore her travel clothes, men's clothes made of strong cloth. Her boots clicked against the stepping stones that formed a snaking path, leading her deeper into the garden.

Penelope hugged herself. Her breath was just visible in the chilly air. She ought not to be here. She ought to be at home, in her workshop, or even by the fire in the kitchen. She did not belong in this different world, different time.

But instead of turning back, she went on, through the sound of singing cicadas, towards the sound of trickling water.

She almost shouted as a great flood of butterflies came out of nowhere, pouring through the garden in a silent rush of orange and black. She put her hands in front of her face to ward off the softly flapping wings, the myriad legs and feelers. In an instant they were

past her and gone, soaring off into the hidden distance.

She caught her breath and moved on.

There was a hut at the garden's centre, its roof partly obscured by old, rich moss. The doorway was so low that Penelope had to get down on her hands and knees and crawl inside.

Inside, the hut had six sides. Six smooth, featureless walls, a high ceiling, out of reach. The doorway she'd crawled through was gone.

Penelope sat against one of the walls, knees pulled up to her chest, arms wrapped around her knees, hands clasped, staring from behind her spectacles.

She took up just a tiny corner of the huge, empty, closed room.

'Out,' whispered Penelope.

It was neither hot nor cold in here. It was neither dark nor fight in here. No one ever came here. And she would never get out.

She turned her face to the wall. 'Out,' she sobbed. 'Let me out.'

9

Pigeon English

Chris pulled on his clothes, scratched at his stubble, and peeked around the corner of the sliding door. Penelope was still asleep beside the smouldering firepit. He decided not to wake her. If today was like yesterday, she'd need her sleep.

Lucky her. He'd managed to stay awake all night. Lucky him.

He got the Doctor's satchel and took out the rainbow egg. It pulsed with light where he touched it.

OK, so how did you play back this thing's recordings? Chris cradled it in his palm, willing it to show him the last day's worth of temporal fluctuations. He turned it around in his hands, squinting in concentration.

It took him five minutes to work out how to do it, imagining time unwinding like a coiled ribbon, feeling the colours rush over the

surface of the egg in reverse.

There. Kame's death, yesterday morning. He let the recording play back for a few seconds – nothing but a murmur of chronons – and then wound it forward, fast.

Nothing. Nothing but the background noise of time.

So Penelope had been wrong about time turning back. Kame had come back to life some other way.

It didn't make sense. The headman had been healed by the pod; it had done all that other stuff. . . so why not Kame? Was there something else around, something they hadn't detected, that was doing it all?

It would really suck if there was a war over the pod, and it turned out not to have any powers at all.

And nobody would listen to him. Sonchou had faith in it; Penelope didn't want to interfere; Kame was bursting for a fight. Everyone wanted the pod just where it was. Except the demons, of course, and seven zillion samurai.

There was a sound like a whip cracking somewhere nearby. It took Chris a moment to recognize it. He dropped the sphere on to his bed and grabbed his 87

shoes as the sound came over and over.

When he opened the sliding door, Penelope was struggling out of her sleeping bag.

'Gunshots,' she said. 'It's started.'

Joel woke up with a dreadful crick in his neck. He fumbled for his glasses, sitting in their case on top of his PowerBook, and looked at his magic nerd watch.

'I'm thirty-three today,' he told the Doctor.

The Time Lord didn't stir. He had been sitting in the lotus position all night –

at least, he'd been sitting there when Joel had got to sleep, and he was still there now. He was back in his own clothes, the borrowed Japanese outfit neatly folded in its box beside him

Joel realized the Doctor was about an inch off the floor. Very clever, old man, but I've seen the future and you're not it. He wondered if he was going to get a chance to drop that little fact into the conversation. Best to save it.

He pulled on his clothes, the jeans and the suede jacket and the *Real Ghost-busters* T-shirt. He was tugging on his overcoat when he saw that the Doctor had come back down to Earth. The Time Lord blinked at him.

'When do you suppose breakfast is?' said Joel.

The Doctor uncurled himself and stretched. 'We'll have to wait until someone comes to get us,' he said.

'Do you reckon the daimyo will have made up his mind?'

'I hope so,' said the Doctor. 'In any case, I want to get back to Hekison as soon as I can. Regardless of what Gufuu decides, I need to find out what that pod is. And get it out of there.'

'I wonder how Chris is doing.'

The Doctor took out a paperback copy of *Kleinzeit*. 'I'm sure he's coping very well.'

Farmers were pouring in through the village gates. 'Shut them! Shut them!'

someone was shouting. The great wooden door closed with an earth-shaking thump.

Kame was the last inside. He ran up to Chris, his face deadly serious. 'Seven of them,' he said. ' *Tengu, I* think.'

Great. Wonderful. *Shit.* 'What weapons?' said Chris. 'Has anyone been hurt?'

'I don't think so,' said Kame. 'They didn't fire on us.'

'Everyone stay calm!' shouted Chris. Villagers with slings and bows were climbing on to roofs, looking down over the fence. 'They might not want to fight. Don't shoot unless they do!'

He climbed up the ladder to the sentry post above the gates. The two

men moved aside respectfully, looking at him to see what he wanted them to do.

'Just wait,' he said quietly. 'We'll see what they want.'

'Here they come, sir!' said one of the sentries, pointing.

They were walking along the path through the middle of the rice paddies, out in the open. They were short, maybe a metre and a half tall. As they came closer, Chris saw that their bodies were hard and dark, their faces beaked and large-eyed.

For a moment, he believed that they were demons, *tengu*, spirits come down from the trees to deal with the meddling mortals.

In the next he saw that they were wearing energy weapons, small pistols hanging from belts around their body armour, and he realized he was grinning all over his face.

OK. All he had to do was stop a fight breaking out. He could handle this.

The demons, aliens – whatever – marched up to the gates and peered up at him. Chris gripped the wooden rail.

The sliding door opened, startling Joel. The Doctor glanced up from his book.

It was Aka-san, in armour, carrying his helmet under his arm.

The samurai spoke. 'My lord directs that I lead a troop of soldiers back to Hekison village, and that we set up camp there to investigate this *kami* and its nature and powers.'

Joel was shutting down his laptop. 'When do we leave?' he asked.

'Isha-san,' said Aka-san, 'you will accompany us and help us in our investigation. Mintsu-san, you will remain here and enjoy the hospitality of Gufuu-sama.'

The Doctor and Joel glanced at each other. 'Gee, they must really like me,'

said the redhead.

'Don't worry,' said the Doctor, standing up. 'I'll sort this out.'

‘No,’ said Joel. He scrambled to his feet. ‘I mean, don’t worry about me.

They’re not going to suddenly behead me, are they?’

‘Hopefully not,’ said the Doctor. He glanced down. Joel took his hand off the Time Lord’s arm. ‘Are you sure about this? Very sure?’

Joel looked into those old eyes. ‘I’m sure,’ he whispered.

The Doctor put his paperback into his pocket and followed Aka-san out of the room. After a few moments, Joel closed the door.

Chris sat in the dust, surrounded on all sides by black birds the size of large children.

They watched him with deep black eyes, their legs tucked up under them like roosting chickens, their wings folded by their sides.

89

Their Talker – Chris hadn’t worked out if she was their leader, exactly, or just the one who, well, did the talking pecked the ground to get his attention.

‘Ke Risht,’ she hissed, taking a stab at his name, ‘Talker will keep this short.

Hei. You have something we want.’

‘All right,’ said Chris. ‘But first, what is it?’

Talker squawked. ‘Seven aliens come looking for something. What do you think it is? Tree no! Hut no! Rice no! Big metal thing fell from sky, you featherless git.’

Chris hoped the TARDIS was enjoying itself translating the Kapteynians’

language. ‘Yes,’ he repeated patiently, ‘but what is it?’

‘Talker not talking about that.’ She waved a wing. ‘None of your business, hair boy. Give it back.’

‘We have a problem,’ said Chris. ‘The – we call it the pod, all right?’ Talker clacked her beak in a gesture that Chris had worked out was a yes. ‘The villagers don’t want to give up the pod. It’s healed people

and it's making their crops grow much faster than normal.'

Talker plucked an insect from her feathers and chewed on it, thoughtfully.

'Must be something else,' she said. 'That pod couldn't be doing it.'

'So you do know what it is?'

'Of course I know what it is, hairy. I know what it can do, which is nothing, so look somewhere else for your farmerbenefiting thing. *Hei.* Now listen.

On Kapteyn's Star 5 there are sixty sentient species, plus. We birds are the negotiators and messengers between all those people. *Hei.* Talker-class birds the best of the lot. Top negotiators. Would've been here earlier except for surveillance drones.'

'The flying heads,' said Chris.

'We don't want to laserize huts, you don't want us to be laserizing them, so give up the pod and we give you hairy folks something nice back, *hei.*'

'Oh, do stop rabbiting on in that ludicrous pidgin,' said one of the other birds.

'Trade tongue is!'

'You mean you don't have to talk like that?' said Chris.

'Well, of course not,' said Talker, 'but the trade tongue's limited vocabulary and simple structure has proven ideal for most interspecies communication.'

'It, ah, sounded a little jumbled. My translator is handling this language much better.'

'Right-oh,' said Talker. 'As I was saying, we're experts in interspecies negotiation. If the villagers aren't willing to give up the pod, we'll trade for it. I take it you're authorized to bargain on their behalf.'

'Well, not exactly,' said Chris. 'But none of them have ever seen an alien before. Besides, I'm the one with the translator.'

‘You’re not from around here, are you?’ Talker looked at him sideways with a big crow eye. ‘I concluded as much when you neither attacked us nor ran away screaming.’

‘I don’t think we should start deciding what to do until we know a bit more about each other.’ It’d be nice if we could do our deciding after the Doctor gets back, he thought. Wonder how long I can stall them.

Talker pecked the ground. ‘All right,’ she said, at length. ‘We’ll tell you the whole story, if you’ll –’

They all looked up at the thunder sound. Hooves. Again. ‘Oh, *no*!’ said Chris, jumping up. ‘Not now!’

‘Don’t worry!’ said Talker, pulling down her helmet. ‘We’ll take care of them.’

‘No!’ said Chris. ‘They shouldn’t see you. We don’t want a fight!’ He grabbed Talker’s weapon as she was aiming it, and they struggled back and forth. She was far too strong for someone who looked like a giant chicken.

The samurai came out of the trees, then. A thousand of them. No, thought Chris, getting his brain back under control, probably about thirty. More than enough to pound the village into the ground.

One of the Kapteynians let loose an energy bolt. It ploughed into the front line of the attacking riders. Horses screamed and reared, and Chris caught a glimpse of a rider spinning wildly, flames shooting up from his banner.

Talker wrestled her gun out of Chris’s hands and bonked him on the head with the butt, not gently. ‘Stand aside, hair boy. We toast these primitives for you, watch and see, *hei*.’

It didn’t stop them. They came thundering across the fallow fields, roaring.

Towards the Kapteynians and their phased plasma rifles. Towards the village.

‘Oh, *shit*,’ said Chris.

Aka-san had put his son in charge of keeping an eye on the Doctor. Young Aoi was being very diligent about making sure his charge didn’t suddenly ride off.

Not that he could have slipped away quickly enough to avoid an arrow in the back.

They rode in formation across the plains, at a leisurely pace, banners flapping in the wind.

It wasn't until they were fording a stream that Aoi got a chance to speak to the Doctor. The man – if he was a man – had been glowering for the entire journey, riding a little apart from the others.

'Lord Doctor,' said Aoi, as their horses splashed through the stream side by side, 'how was it you defeated the vampire?'

The man looked up from his thoughts. Aoi could almost see him packing them away, his eyes losing their depth as he considered the young man riding 91

beside him.

'She was greedy,' he said. 'And she'd never drunk blood like mine before.'

What kind of blood? wondered Aoi. 'I let her drain me until she thought I was dead. When she was sleeping, I set the Castle on fire.'

They emerged from the water, their horses shaking themselves. The Doctor added, 'It's not as romantic as the fairy tales that built up around it, I'm afraid.

It was brutal and straightforward.'

'Her bite cannot have been pleasant.'

'I meant setting the fire,' said the Doctor. 'My socks are wet.' He looked up sharply. 'Oh no,' he whispered.

Aoi frowned, puzzled. A moment later he smelt the smoke on the wind.

His father barked a command, and they were suddenly galloping forward, covering the last ground between them and Hekison village. Aoi remembered the way the forest thinned out to nothing, and then an empty plain, the steep rise.

Before they got to the top they could see the fat black clouds of smoke, rising.

The samurai halted at the top of the slope, their horses snorting with alarm.

Red and orange flames were poking fingers up through the dense smoke –

spreading rapidly from the front of the little village, Aoi saw.

Samurai were galloping all around Hekison, shouting, loosing arrows. They had broken formation. Aoi couldn't see who they were firing at. The villagers couldn't be putting up that much resistance, surely. . .

He heard his father's shouted order, and almost before he knew it, he was racing down the hill, drawing his long *katana*, ready to protect the property of Gufuu Kocho. Stampeding through the rice paddies, trampling the plants beneath their hooves.

Somewhere behind him, amid the cries and the thunder, he could hear the Doctor shouting something. But he couldn't make out what it was.

Penelope was running.

There was nowhere safe. As soon as you ducked behind one building, the samurai wheeled around in their lethal dance, helmets racing past the irregular line of the fence.

Some of them were fighting hand to hand. They weren't the problem. It was the ones who were taking potshots at one another.

Penelope heard something whizz past her head like an angry insect. She tried not to think about what might have happened if the shot had been a little closer. Beyond the fence, there were constant sharp noises as the har-quebusiers fired, and louder, tearing noises as the bird creatures fired their weapons. Searing orange and purple light danced behind the posts and vines.

At the back of the village, at the furthest point from the fighting, Mr Cwej was herding peasants over the fence. They were shouting, or standing still in confusion, but the ones who had got the idea were running into the forest.

Penelope wondered if she could make it across the few yards between them.

Mr Cwej glanced up and saw her, shouting something over the noise of the battle.

She saw a woman run towards him, saw an arrow come from nowhere and embed itself in her skinny body. The woman stood for a moment, as though astonished, and then crumpled into the dust.

There was another of the searing flashes, and the hut next to Penelope suddenly caught fire, the thatch exploding into red and orange flame.

Penelope put her back to the wooden wall and wished to God there was somewhere to run to. But there was nowhere. She could not move.

Joel slid the paper door open an inch. There was a samurai standing next to it. He smiled upwards at the man, sheepishly, and closed the door again.

They had just left him alone, sent him food and escorted him to the bath house and toilet. But other than that, nothing. They politely avoided his questions. He spent his time writing in his journal and playing Tetris – until that got boring. Then he lay on his back on a futon, listening to the silence.

Joel prayed silently for ventilation ducts. But there was nowhere to run to.

He could not move.

'She did not protect us.'

Chris raised his head. The Doctor gently pushed him back down.

It was Sonchou's wife – Chris never had caught her name. One of her grandkids was hanging on to her, tiny face buried in her clothes.

She knelt in the middle of a street. In the middle of Hekison village. Her face was smeared with soot.

The Doctor was feeling Chris's ribs, methodically. Head down. Focused.

Paying no attention to the woman.

'She did not protect us,' said Sonchou's wife again.

Chris flinched as the Doctor found a palmful of pain. 'Bruised,'

murmured the Time Lord, ‘but not broken.’

Behind the woman, Chris could see the remains of her home. The wooden walls had fallen in, the stilts had collapsed. It was a charred house of cards, just a pile of ruined pieces.

They were all like that. Except for perhaps a few further up the hill. The fire had strolled from wooden house to wooden house, easily, lazily. Here and there were walls embedded with arrows. Here and there were people embedded with arrows.

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‘All right,’ said the Doctor.

Chris sat up, gingerly.

It all came slamming into his field of view. The bodies, the burnt houses, the shattered fence, the cries and the wailing. Samurai bodies, mostly. But not all of them. Kame, dead again, struck down by a barrage of arrows, looking like a porcupine. Sonchou, the old headman, face down in the mud after catching a lungful of searing smoke.

‘I tried,’ Chris said, bending forward, trying to curl up around the thumping pain in his chest. ‘Goddess, I tried.’

‘I know you did.’ The Doctor put his hand on Chris’s hair. ‘It wasn’t your fault.’

‘Do you tell yourself that?’ gasped Chris.

He reached out for the Time Lord, and held on to him, his eyes overwhelmed, blinded by smoke and destruction.

‘What did I tell you?’ he yelled.

94

Second Slice

The life-giving sword

What does a Time Lord really know about death, about the consuming, gnawing fear of losing one’s grip on life and falling off into the unknown? The Doctor’s been through pain before, been threatened with death in a thousand forms, but he always bounces

back. What's regeneration, even, but one almighty bounce? Where others tremble on the brink of eternity, the Doctor goes bungee-jumping.

Rebecca J. Anderson, *Sacrifice*, 1996

10

Changing direction

The samurai wouldn't let them have a fire, but they found themselves huddling around the firepit anyway.

The air was still heavy with smoke. Penelope guessed the burnt smell wouldn't go away for days. She tried going to the doorway for a breath of fresh air, but the odour seemed even worse outside.

A handful of buildings, at the edge of the village, had survived the blaze.

The fence was a tangle of vines and charcoal.

Unsurprisingly, the shrine was untouched.

Penelope turned back to the other huddled prisoners. The headman's wife; a mother and her squalling child; three farmers. Kame, sitting off to one side, holding one of the arrows that had felled him. The samurai stroked the feathers, slowly, wondering.

Their single guard was the youngest warrior to have survived the battle, a sixteen-year-old who looked nearly as scared as they were. Providence only knew why Gufuu's samurai were bothering to keep them prisoner.

The Doctor and Chris sat at the edge of the firepit. Mr Cwej had his head down, as though he didn't have the strength to lift it.

The Doctor was stroking the hair over the boy's left ear, speaking softly. 'And then what happened?'

'I realized I couldn't stop the fighting,' murmured Mr Cwej. Penelope sat down, keeping a little distance away, watching. 'The samurai just kept charging, even when the Kapteynians were firing right amongst them.'

'And then what happened?'

‘I climbed back up the rope and got into the village. They were shouting and screaming.’

‘We could hear the battle,’ said Penelope, ‘but we couldn’t see what was happening.’

The Doctor’s eyes flicked up to her for a moment, and then went back to Mr Cwej. After his near-hysteria earlier, the boy was quiet, almost sleepy. Was 97

the Doctor using some form of mesmerism? Or perhaps some Zen technique?

‘I told them to evacuate. They were frightened. I tried shouting at them.

Just made it worse. Wasn’t until the fence caught fire that they started to move. Stray energy bolt hit it. Went up in a whoosh of pink flame. Still some of them wouldn’t go. They were trying to put the fire out. I couldn’t get them all to go. Some of them even came back after we’d got them over the fence.

Why didn’t it help us? Why didn’t it protect us?’

‘It’s selfish,’ said the Doctor. ‘It only saved me because it thinks I can help it.’

‘It thinks?’ said Penelope, but the Doctor ignored her, frowning. He glanced through the doorway, towards the untouched shrine.

‘If the samurai try to take it. . . ’

‘They wouldn’t listen to me,’ murmured Mr Cwej. ‘They wouldn’t *listen* to me, none of them would!’

‘Shhh. . . ’ The Doctor stroked Chris’s hair until the boy quietened. ‘That’s better. Now listen to me, Chris Cwej.’ The boy nodded, almost imperceptibly.

‘What happened here was not your fault.’

‘I was supposed to stop this –’

‘No. Listen. You couldn’t have stopped this. It was just very bad luck.’

‘You asked me –’

‘I didn’t ask you to magically prevent anything from happening. By evacuating the villagers, you did the best you could to save their lives. You couldn’t have done anything more to help them. Do you believe me?’

Mr Cwej’s head lowered further. ‘No,’ he whispered.

The Doctor put his other hand on Chris’s head, making his companion look up into his eyes. ‘Do you believe me?’ he repeated, sternly.

‘Yes.

‘You need sleep. There’s nothing more to be done now. Get some rest.’

Mr Cwej obediently lay down on his side and curled into a ball. In moments, he was snoring.

The Doctor moved over to Penelope’s side. ‘He was so badly affected,’ she murmured. Mr Cwej’s hands had been curled into fists; now they were relax-ing, pale fingers against the sooty floor. ‘Have you. . . healed him?’

The time traveller shrugged his shoulders, folding his arms as though to keep himself warm. ‘He’ll need a lot more than that to regain the confidence he’s lost. Long before we arrived here.’

‘These villagers have lost a lot more,’ Penelope said, and the words just came tumbling out. ‘See what your interference has done, you proud man.

Look at them!’

The Doctor didn’t look up. ‘And where were you during the battle?’

Penelope frowned. ‘Helping Mikeneko pull her grandchildren out of a burning hut.’

‘Ah,’ he said, and smiled without humour. ‘There’s hope for you yet.’

‘I feel,’ said Penelope, ‘filthy. Not because there is soot in my mouth and nose and my clothes are muddy. I feel damned for my part in this tragedy.

Damned.’

‘Then you have two choices,’ said the Doctor. His voice sounded as though it was coming from a long way away. ‘You can stay in hell.’

‘Or?’ said Penelope, at length.

The Doctor looked up at the time conveyance, lying in the corner like a sorry collection of clockwork.

'You can win.'

The afternoon was dragging for Aoi. He sat on the veranda of the house, his back to the captives, and wished his father had seen fit to give him a more important duty than watching over these peasants.

He felt a little sorry for them, but peasants must be used to this sort of thing, so why didn't they stop crying? He shifted his position, holding his spear across his lap.

From here he had a view of the rest of the ruined village. In the centre were the remains of the great bonfire where they had burnt the enemy corpses, along with the handful of villagers who had been caught by arrows or trampled by horses.

To one side was the shrine. Two huts to either side had collapsed, their singed roofs lying on piles of charred timber. The shrine itself had escaped the fire, though it was covered in soot and ash.

Their own honoured dead were being taken to their families by the messengers who were returning to court.

Kiiro was amongst them, slain by some kind of demon fire, his skin blackened and his armour warped. Father had not said a word about his old friend's demise, though his face was stem.

Aoi had caught a glimpse of the object inside the shrine, part stone and part metal. Or perhaps there were two objects. His father had not permitted anyone to go into the building, not until they had reinforcements. The Doctor had told him just what had happened to Umemi's initial taskforce.

If the *kami* had any magic, it wasn't using it. If it had any magic at all, and it wasn't just a trick to frighten away gullible *bushi*.

As far as Aoi could see, the only power it had was the power to make men greedy, and to rain destruction on them. They ought to bury it deep beneath the ground and forget about it.

* * *

The Doctor had been working on Penelope's time conveyance for hours. It was starting to get dark, but once again the dim light didn't bother him.

Penelope glanced towards the door. Their guard had his back to them –

one of the older samurai now, she saw. She wanted to borrow the Doctor's *flashlight*, but she didn't want to risk attracting the warrior's attention.

She peered at the time traveller's scrawled diagrams, hoping they would begin to make sense. He had jotted them down on the back of a cafe menu, a flier from an organization called Greenpeace, and a parchment covered in writing she couldn't understand. And then he had rolled up his sleeves and gone to work on the engine of her time conveyance.

Half the components were scattered across the floor in bits, including the futuristic battery which Mr Cooke had concocted for it in 1996. The other half had assumed an angular shape, no larger than a typewriter. It looked as though he had preserved the central calculating device, but had removed all of the parts necessary to input or output information. She felt a pang. Her child was shrunken, blind and helpless.

The Doctor sat back, evidently having finished his. . . modifications. He took the strange little egg-shaped device from his pocket. It was evidently deactivated, silent and colourless.

The screaming child had at last fallen silent, nestled in its exhausted mother's arms. Kame was snoring, the arrow still clutched in one hand. The other peasants watched the Doctor and wondered what he was doing.

He rolled the egg in amongst the cogs and gears of the engine. Now he could reach into the angular mass and touch the device. And yet somehow it had become part of the machine. How he had made the two technologies mesh was beyond her.

'They should be asleep by now,' he whispered, 'for the most part. We only need to worry about that one guard.' The Doctor nodded at the back of 'their'

samurai. 'I think it's time to wake Chris up.'

Penelope bolted out of the house, clutching the *flashlight* to her chest. ‘Stop!’

shrieked the guard, leaping to his feet, as she nimbly jumped down to the ground.

She turned. He was on his feet, hand on the hilt of his sword. She lifted the flashlight and shone its beam full in his face.

He was startled by the bright light, but only for a moment. Long enough for Mr Cwej to come up behind him and take hold of his neck.

The Doctor had muttered some explanation about nerve compression. However the fighting technique worked, it was certainly effective. The samurai’s eyes rolled up and he dropped into Mr Cwej’s grip.

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The Adjudicator gently lowered the man to the veranda. Penelope was already scrambling back up, aware of the samurai’s shout. Mr Cwej propped the warrior up against the wall and followed her back into the hut.

The Doctor hovered in the doorway. After a moment, a shout came from somewhere below them, in the courtyard.

The Doctor called out. Penelope didn’t think it was a very good impression of the samurai’s voice, but it seemed to calm whoever’s sleep had been disturbed.

They waited a few more minutes, ears straining at the night’s silence.

‘All right,’ said the Doctor. Penelope jumped at the sound of his voice. ‘Now for the tricky bit.’ He sat cross-legged in front of the modified time conveyance and thrust a hand into the clockwork.

A pale light filled the room as he made adjustments to the ovoid. ‘The tricky bit,’ he murmured, as the peasants watched in awe and Mr Cwej watched in fascination, ‘is to take the pod with us. I have to create two self-contained time-space areas for the transport, without a direct link between them.’

‘Can you use the egg’s recordings?’ asked Mr Cwej.

‘That’s just what I’m doing. The coordinates might be a bit approximate, though. Better to take a bit too much than a bit too

little!'

The light from the egg suddenly brightened to the point at which it was too harsh to look at. 'Right, said the Doctor.

He picked up Penelope's precious box of spare punchcards, plucked one out, and deftly poked a series of holes in it with a pen.

'Exactly what are you doing?' said Penelope, in alarm.

'Hold on!' said the time traveller. He fed the card into the hybrid mechanism.

Penelope felt her stomach turn over. The light leapt outwards, forcing her eyes closed. For a moment her ears rang. There was a violent lurch, like the feeling of a ship's deck beneath your feet in rough water.

She opened her eyes.

She was in a forest.

Her first urge was to faint dead away.

At least one of the peasants had actually done so. The others were praying fervently: 'Save us from suffering, save us from harm, Bodhisattva, come to us!'

Scores of them. All praying. As Penelope looked around, she realized they were in a clearing. A fire flickered in the middle, and the surviving villagers were huddled around it, staring up at them.

No – staring past them. Penelope turned around.

The pod was a foot behind her. She leapt backwards and nearly fell into the fire.

* * *

101

A fox watched Chris from the forest.

All the others were sleeping, all but a couple of guards. The scrap of meat it wanted was right near the awake one.

The fox wondered whether he was going to go to sleep. Might he lie

down, start snoring? Might he nod off still sitting up, his eyes drooping until the fox could no longer make them out in the firelight? Just long enough for a quick dash to the scrap and back again?

But the human obstinately refused to close his eyes, as though he had something against sleep. Eventually the fox gave up in disgust, winding its way back into the forest.

Penelope opened her eyes as someone prodded her with their toe.

'Sorry to wake you,' said the Doctor.

'You didn't,' said Penelope, sitting up. Damp leaves fell off her clothes. 'I'm afraid even my adventures in Africa as a younger woman did not prepare me for slumber in a wet Japanese forest.'

He squatted down beside her. The clearing was full of movement. 'Dawn's not far away,' he said. 'The samurai are going to get quite a surprise when they wake up. I don't think they'll be in a very good mood.'

'Where are we going?' He held out a hand, and she let him help her to her feet.

'Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery,' he said. 'The chief monk is a friend of mine.

Take Kame with you on the journey. He'll look after you.'

'My carriage,' said Penelope.

The Doctor turned to follow her gaze. Mr Cwej was checking the reins of the two horses.

The pod was strapped to the back of the hansom cab, like a bizarre piece of luggage. Some of the fused soil had been roughly chiselled away from it, lightening the load.

Penelope went up to the bizarre object. Its 'arms' protruded from one side of the vehicle. She looked at them, struck again by their resemblance to an insect's legs – cast in metal, warped by the heat of their fall through the atmosphere. They seemed too delicate to have survived the plummet.

The thing's shape was like an hourglass: a thicker section at the 'head' end, from which the 'arms' protruded, a narrower midsection, and

then a thicker base.

‘Doctor,’ she said, ‘exactly how did you bring us here last night?’

He clasped his hands behind his back, suddenly turning into a university lecturer. ‘Your mechanism was lacking a power source which could create a dimensional warping effect. I provided one.’

‘In the form of the “egg”?’

‘Yes. But it’s still your Analytical Engine that’s creating the essential equations.’

Penelope realized she was smiling broadly. She wiped the expression from her face. ‘What about the villagers?’

‘They’re going to the monastery as well,’ he said. ‘The pod ought to be safe there, at least until we can determine what it is. And the chief monk can help find new homes for the villagers. A handful of them will be going to relatives in nearby villages, and one or two to Toshi to look for work. But for now, they need sanctuary.’

Mikeneko, Sonchou’s wife, came up to them and bowed to the Doctor. ‘We are ready to set out,’ she said.

‘You won’t be able to keep up with the cab,’ said Penelope. ‘Doctor –’

‘I don’t want them to,’ he said. ‘Mikeneko-san, if the samurai find you, you must tell them everything. Don’t try to protect us. They won’t hurt you – it’s only the pod they want.’

‘Very well, Isha-sama. We should arrive at the monastery tomorrow afternoon.’ Her face was lined and dirty, her eyes shining too brightly. The shock had been forced down inside, Penelope suspected. The feeling of damnation rose in her again, and she turned away.

‘What’s it like?’

The Doctor glanced at Chris, but didn’t answer.

They had been silent for a long time, sitting side by side at the front of the cab. Penelope was inside with her time machine, hopefully getting some sleep.

Chris had slept fine, deeply, dreamlessly, but he still felt washed out.

When he tried to think about what had happened yesterday, his mind sort of. . . and he wasn't sure whether it was some kind of weird shock, or something the Doctor had done.

'The first time the Doctor said, snapping Chris out of his reverie, 'I don't remember, I was unconscious. The second time. . . I don't want to talk about.'

'The third time?'

'Unconscious.'

'The fourth time?'

'Atypical. There were some strange time and energy effects involved.'

'But, you know, what does it feel like? Is it good or bad?'

'Good,' said the Doctor, 'in the same way that driving a vehicle very, very fast is a good feeling, until *pow!* ' He slapped his hands together suddenly.

'Like being shoved through a window. That's what it was like the fifth time.'

'What about the sixth time?'

'Unconscious.'

'But I mean,' said Chris, 'and stop me if this is getting too personal –'

'I will,' said the Doctor. 'Ask me now.' (You might not get another chance, he didn't add.)

Chris's heart sank further in the direction of his sandals. 'How does it feel?

Do you feel good because you realize you're not going to die?'

'No.' The Doctor didn't look at him, eyes focusing far away, amongst the trees and the pattern of light and shadow. 'You feel awful, because you know you are going to die. Again.' An expression flickered over his face for a moment, as though he had remembered something and then forgotten it. 'With a bit of luck I won't be awake for the next one either.'

‘But you said. . . ’ But Joel said. ‘You said you knew you were going to regenerate, because you’d found out about one of your future selves.’

‘There are no guarantees,’ said the Doctor sternly. ‘History can change – as well you know. You don’t imagine I go about thinking I’m invulnerable, do you?’

Chris didn’t say anything, fighting off a smile. It went away of its own accord when he thought of the next question.

What would it take to kill you, Doctor?

Chris turned the macabre thought over in his mind. The Doctor did seem invulnerable, the way he was always able to find a way out of impossible situations – or to take whatever damage was thrown at him. If he had the chance to plan or improvise, he’d always be one step ahead of death.

But what if it was something random? Like a stray laser bolt? Something he couldn’t predict or control?

What if it was an accident?

Chris glanced at the Doctor, who was scowling at the path in front of them, deep in thought. And he suddenly realized why the Doctor had been so jittery, so angry, all this time.

He knew it was coming. He knew he was going to be *helpless*.

Chris suddenly felt terribly sorry for the old bastard.

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11

Sixteenth-century digital boy

Tuesday 21 May 1996, subjective time

Probably March 1560, local time

Dear Diary,

This seemed like a brilliant idea two weeks ago.

However, when you are actually sitting in a sixteenth century Japanese palace (why here and now? I wanted pre-industrial, but this

is ridiculous!) and typing on your PowerBook, it's too late to worry whether your time travel plan was as clever as you thought.

A few dozen entries ago, I was telling you about that shell-shocked look the aliens sometimes have. You can see it in their eyes, if they have eyes – a kind of mix of surprise and defeat. The look people have when they've lost an argument or a job and they can't quite work out how.

Heck, I saw that look a month ago, in the eyes of a Lacaillan scout. (We've had a lot of scouts recently. The various species with a greedy eye on Earth have apparently decided that a single alien is a lot less conspicuous than a horde, or even a reconnaissance team.)

The Doctor (how do I use our future meeting?) had brought the scout to us after bewildering him to a standstill. I didn't get the full story, something involving the London phone system, amphibians, and static electricity, but all that

Lacaillan wanted was to get home as fast as possible.

I hope I'm not starting to get that look. The Lacaillan scout's look, like his brain was in backwards. The Doctor asked me: 'Are you sure about this? Very sure?' As though he *knew* what I was planning.

Supposedly he can't read your mind.

Maybe he knows my plan (such as it is) isn't going to work. Maybe the daimyo's going to have me boiled in oil. Maybe he does know what I've got in mind, and the pod is so much more important that he can't be bothered with 105

me. . . for the moment.

(As you know, dear diary, I nearly dropped the whole idea when he first turned up. Somehow I should've known he would.) The pod looks like a satellite to me. Probably left by some BEM or other to observe the human race until we're worth conquering. Ran out of power and fell out of the sky. (Wouldn't it be more likely to have fallen into an ocean?

Maybe the bottom of the Atlantic is covered in alien space junk!) At least I won't have the same problem, if Tony the techie Tzun's battery additions keep on working. (Now, that'd be embarrassing – stuck three centuries in the past without the PowerBook. Geez, I think I just scared myself.) I'm still wondering – why here, why now? Is it a

coincidence that a time machine pops up just when I'm thinking about leaving Little Caldwell? Does it have anything to do with falling back in time ten years when I was a kid?

Did I attract something's attention? Am I really that important?

Frankly, diary, I doubt it. Stranger things have happened.

Later.

At least they're feeding me. That's all they're doing, though. I'm hoping it's just that the daimyo's personal organizer is kind of full right now.

It was too late to change plans as soon as I sent that message to the daimyo, asking to stay. I had to tell it to a page – he wasn't impressed that I couldn't write. Geez, what if he didn't bother to actually pass it on to the daimyo?

What if I really am being held hostage? (Maybe I should have let the Doctor talk me out of here. . . but if the daimyo did get my message, that would mean the Doctor finding out about it. My brain hurts.) My knees hurt. The many things I wish I had with me include a camp stool and a guide to Japanese etiquette (so I know when it's OK to sit instead of kneeling). Not to mention a Japanese dictionary, a CD player and my Rush collection, and a spray can of Samurai-Away, just in case.

I've gotta stay calm. Try to connect with that confidence I was feeling when the idea first hit.

Heck, maybe the Doctor even *approves*. He knows I'm one of the good guys.

It's not like the Admiral's big, doomed attempt to change history. If I can make a few little changes, help a few people here and there, I'll be doing just what he does.

Yeah. Even if the Doctor does know what I'm planning, either he thinks it's OK or he's too stressed out to care. And Chris is a mess, poor kid – that'd be enough to distract anyone.

Anyway, I've gone too far to stop now. Haven't I?

* * *

Chris hoped Penelope had guessed what was going on. The ride inside the cab must be hell.

They flew across stones and tracks, the whole vehicle shaking as though it was about to fall apart. It had been designed for London's paved streets, not for a helter-skelter chase through the Japanese countryside.

He risked a glance back. They had lost all but a handful of their pursuers.

There were two arrows embedded in the side of the cab. Which, if she could see them, might give Penelope a hint about why they'd suddenly broken into a furious gallop.

The Doctor still had his bow. He was loosing incredibly precise shots over the top of the cab, popping up, aiming for a split second, and then launching a blunt-tipped arrow at one of their pursuers.

Some had tumbled from their horses, half stunned by the sudden impact on their armour, then stunned the other half by the rough fall. Some had lost swords or spears, knocked neatly out of their hands. The Doctor had even used a 'live' arrowhead to snip the bowstring of one of their attackers.

He hadn't even broken a sweat, loosing the arrows like he was tossing pebbles into a lake. Chris was grinning all over his face. If Zen archery taught you to make neat shots like that, it'd be worth putting up with years more of those lessons!

The Doctor was running out of arrows, but they were running out of pursuers. There hadn't been more than a dozen samurai in the patrol anyway, and maybe thirty lowerclass warriors on foot.

'Just three more of them,' shouted the Doctor.

'Is there any way we can use the egg, er, Penelope's machine to escape?'

'Best to save it,' shouted the Doctor. 'Probably only one, maybe two more jaunts left in it.'

There was an almighty cracking sound. Chris almost dropped the reins.

‘What the cruk?’

The Doctor twisted in his seat. ‘Just two more of them,’ he corrected himself.

‘Penelope?’

The Doctor was nocking another of the blunt arrows. ‘I’m afraid so,’ he said.

‘Don’t look. She’s leaning out of the window with her matchlock.’

The Doctor sat right up in his seat, almost standing, and Chris suddenly realized he was taking aim at Penelope’s gun. He fought the urge to turn around and watch what happened next – if they caught a wheel on one of those big rocks, they’d go flying.

Penelope loosed another shot. Chris expected the Doctor to let his arrow fly, but the Time Lord sat back down, letting his bowstring relax. ‘They’re turning back,’ he said. ‘She’s given them a thorough scare.’

‘Did she kill one of them?’

‘I think so. Her gun’s one of the Japanese adaptations of the Portuguese originals. Those bullets will go right through armour.’ The Doctor scowled.

‘She probably thought she was doing the right thing,’ said Chris.

‘Of course she did,’ grumbled the Doctor. ‘Just trying to help.’

‘And they were trying to kill us.’

‘Hmmph. At least the pod didn’t fall off. Goodness knows how much longer the back axle will hold out. Are we still heading in the right direction?’

‘I have no idea,’ Chris said.

‘Right then,’ said the Doctor. ‘Pull over. We’ll take a look at the map.’

‘Goddess, I enjoyed that!’ said Chris, as the horses slowed. The Doctor’s serious look became *more* serious. ‘How do you suppose Joel is getting along?’

‘Oh, I’m sure he’s having a marvellous time.’

Later.

Oh man, diary, I’m still wobbly.

The daimyo sent one of his pages to collect me. I got to see quite a bit of the palace – I think the page was meant to give me a bit of a tour, show it off. It’s huge, it’s empty, it’s clean. There are gardens around it and courtyards inside.

(The thing that really amazes me – and is kind of frustrating – are the bathrooms. They’re like outhouses – you get there via a paved path – and they’re incredibly clean. I think there’s a servant whose job it is to clean the thing out every time someone uses it. And there’s hand-made toilet paper, and perfume. I was hoping to sell them plumbing.) They wash – twice a day – and they have clean toilets. These guys are *civilized*.

On the other hand. . .

I got to see something I really really wish I hadn’t. Lord Gufuu testing out his new sword. Thing is, he was testing it out on some poor bastard who had left him to work for the other daimyo, Umemi. Which counts as treason, of course.

The page brought me to one of the gardens – a dry garden, he said. It was just raked sand and rocks and moss. We waited there.

They’d tied the poor guy up and packed sandbags around him, with just his head sticking out. Thank God he had his back to us. I really don’t think I could’ve handled seeing his face.

Out comes Lord Gufuu with his brand-new sword, at which point I tried to make a hasty exit, only the page put his hand on my arm. Just firmly enough to let me know I wasn’t going anywhere.

Gufuu took the guy’s head off with one swing. No noise, just one swing, and I saw the guy’s head disappear off into a flower bed. Someone ran to get it before it could bleed on the irises. Which was bad enough. But then they 108

pulled what was left of him out of the sandbags, pegged it on a mound of dirt, and Gufuu chopped him into little bits.

When he was done, he wiped off the edge of the blade and checked it,

turning it so it would catch the sunshine. At first, I thought he must really hate the guy. Then I realized he was just testing the sword some more, seeing if it could get through bone without getting nicked or scratched.

(It was a bit obvious, really – they wanted to impress on me the importance of loyalty, the punishment for failure, etc., etc. Dear diary, it bloody worked!!!) Thing is, *I didn't throw up.* I was expecting to. I kept waiting to. When we first stopped in the garden, and it suddenly hit me – like a ton of bricks – what I was seeing, I felt my lunch heading in the general direction of my head.

But I didn't throw up. I kept telling myself that I was back in history now, they did things differently here, that I had to get used to it. And it worked.

It's getting too dark to see properly. I'm going to catch some Zs. More tomorrow.

109

12

Alienation

Te Yene Rana couldn't be bothered with holograms. As far as the Caxtarid was concerned, she looked close enough to human to pass for one, and if the primitives didn't like her metallic red hair and eyes, that was their problem.

So she told herself. The truth was that she wasn't properly equipped for a first-contact situation. So far she'd been mistaken for a foreigner, a demon and some kind of sex worker. Thanks. She was in a foul mood.

So she sulked in her room at the inn in Toshi town, using remote drones to gather information. Without the right equipment or reinforcements, with a suspected alien involvement, she had to play this very carefully.

One of her drones had been following the little expedition from Hekison village. She'd watched them all day, bored to death, eating raw fish – whole fish, not this sashimi nonsense – and waiting for them to arrive. Bring the damned thing to her. Thanks.

She was damned worried about those aliens now. The damned

damned drones did not have damned translators built in; she had been trying to play back their recordings through her single translator unit, but the damned sound wasn't good enough.

Besides, the drones were incredibly conspicuous. She had one open now, ripping its guts out, finding the essential bits so she could make a small, in-conspicuous, sound-only version, filtered through her translator.

She looked at the bug she'd created. Looked like a damned enormous fly.

She chucked it out of the window. The miniature drive cut in a moment before it hit the ground, and it bumbled off down the street, swatted at by a peasant as it buzzed past.

She'd left the thing enough vision to steer by. She sat at the unrolled moni-tor screen, directing it with one finger on a palm-sized, flat pad.

Soon enough she found them, conspicuous with their white skin and (foreign?) vehicle. She flew the clumsy bug along the wall of the building, trying not to bounce the little drone off the wooden planks, and parked it outside the 111

window of their room. On the second try. The first time, she eavesdropped on a conversation about Noh masks for ten minutes until she realized she had the wrong room.

The fly settled into place on the windowsill. The translation scrolled slowly up the screen as the aliens jabbered away.

DOCTOR: Chris.

CHRIS: Oh no. Not this again.

DOCTOR: We need to talk.

CHRIS: What – what exactly did you do to me yesterday? I mean, when I was telling you about what happened to the village? (Pause) It's like I can remember it all in detail, but I can't feel the feelings.

DOCTOR: There's no time. There's never time to feel the feelings. Not when you're in the thick of it. Deal with the emergency first, and then angst about it afterwards.

CHRIS: And we're still in the emergency?

DOCTOR: Yes. Until we get the pod to safety, and find out what it is.

CHRIS: Yeah, but – isn't it sort of – I mean, I can remember being completely freaked out about the village burning down, isn't it sort of unhealthy for me to supp–

(Several seconds' silence)

DOCTOR: That's better. I –

CHRIS: It's just that after all this time I don't think I can cut it any more. You know, I've been tested and stretched and I've found my limits and they're not broad enough. I can do the not-thinking-about-it thing: I blew up all those Martians without giving it a second thought, remember? That's not the problem. I can't do the samurai thing. I can't just throw my life away.

That was why I couldn't save her. Don't you see? That's why I keep having those dreams. But I'm not like you. I can't do it. I can't manipulate people. I can't just be a hero. I can't just put my fear on one side. I can't stop *thinking* about it! About all of it, about what will happen if I screw up, about all the people depending on me, to keep them alive, or even to kill them! I'm too young to be outliving everyone I know! I need to be relieved of duty. I'm unfit for duty!

DOCTOR: Relieved of duty. Imagine what it would be like (Pause) Did you feel cheated when the Turtle didn't kill you?

Te Yene Rana, who had almost fallen asleep, found herself suddenly interested.

CHRIS: Don't talk about that! We left that behind us on Yemaya 4! And it was 112

just a red herring anyway! There was no Turtle!

DOCTOR: It seems to me that you haven't left it behind at all CHRIS: Yes I have! I don't want to talk about it!

DOCTOR: Were you disappointed? You thought you were going to be killed by some abominable god.

Yeah, that sounded like the Turtle Te Yene Rana was familiar with. These aliens had been around.

CHRIS: Devoured.

DOCTOR: Devoured?

CHRIS: Sacrificed.

DOCTOR: Sacrificed?

CHRIS: Punished!

DOCTOR: Yes. The telepathic attack connected right with your self-worth. Or rather, this unconscious self-worthlessness. The feeling that you're not good enough, that you're not doing enough.

CHRIS: I'm different. Do you remember when I shot those two Nazis, and I was so pleased with myself, and you said

DOCTOR: 'Chris, this isn't a video game.'

CHRIS: I'm different now.

DOCTOR: But not that different. Changes come slowly in human beings.

Imagine what it's like to know you might wake up, suddenly, completely different. With a new face, with a new personality. Suddenly you like jazz instead of opera; suddenly you can't stand pears when you used to love *poires en douillon*; suddenly you're shouting at your companions or you're seeing patterns that you never used to see

CHRIS: It's not my fault! It's not my fault you're going to regenerate!

DOCTOR: You have to be ready! I have to finish –

CHRIS: Teaching me? Training me? Changing me? What are you trying to turn me into? You? Is that it? What if I can't be you! What if I don't want to be you! It's not my fault you're going to die! I didn't build that Room without any doors!

DOCTOR: What!

CHRIS: Am I going mad? Do you think I'm going mad? Is that what the dreams are about? I know it runs in the family. Like noses. Like being an Adjudicator runs in the family. My grandfather was completely bonkers before he died.

DOCTOR: You're not going mad, Chris. Listen to me. It's not meant for you, it's not meant for *you* –

CHRIS: Don't die. (Pause) Please don't die. Please don't go away and leave us 113

alone.

(Several minutes silence)

DOCTOR: It's the effort that counts, Chris.

CHRIS: No.

DOCTOR: Most people don't even try to make a difference.

CHRIS: No, no.

DOCTOR: I don't know what to say. I don't. . . I just don't.

CHRIS: I know. What is this human thing called 'feeling'? (Pause) I'm sorry, that was uncalled for.

DOCTOR: The Room. . .

CHRIS: It's just a dream I keep having.

DOCTOR: No.

CHRIS: It must be so frightening.

DOCTOR: I don't have time to be frightened. No room for angst, no room for self-pity. Just get the job done and then gibber in a corner.

CHRIS: (Small laugh) Yeah.

It went on like that for another ten minutes, before the Doctor sent Chris out on some errand or other. Te Yene Rana powered down the fly, sending it instructions to come back on line if another conversation started.

She didn't know what all that had been about, and she didn't especially care. All that damned babble hadn't left her any wiser about what they knew about 'the pod'.

'Thanks,' she muttered, and settled down with another raw fish. To wait.

The Doctor had sent Chris off to see to the horses. Now he sat alone in the room in the inn.

He remembered fainting in the garden of Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery, on his first day out of the Life-Prolonging Room. The pale sunshine against the wall, the smooth texture of the wood under his hands as he fell against it, the hoe dropping from his fingers. The soft dirt catching him.

He remembered trying to open his eyes as Chiyono argued with the head monk, Kadoguchi-roshi's predecessor, a terrible old grouch who was forever knocking his students over the head in the hopes of enlightening them.

The old master hadn't been interested in the nun's explanations. As far as he was concerned, this layabout was long overdue to leave the monastery.

Somehow or other the Doctor had managed to get back to his feet and get on with the gardening, the sun a bright and painful blur at the edge of his vision. The old Roshi had snorted and wandered off to find someone else to berate.

Sometimes all you wanted to do was sleep.

114

There was a small, neat knock at the door. 'Come in,' he called, after a moment.

Penelope slid the door open, looking uncomfortable in her slippered feet.

She looked up and down the narrow corridor outside, weary with the pressure of curious eyes, and came inside, closing the door behind her.

She sat on the floor, her legs folded to one side. 'I've been thinking –' she began.

' *I've* been thinking about your time machine,' he said. He pulled the miniature table to him. There was a scroll map draped across it, along with scribbled diagrams of Penelope's Riemann engine. 'Now, if it couldn't have powered your trips through the fourth dimension, how was it you came all this way?'

Penelope frowned, annoyed at being cut off, but waited to hear what he had to say.

'It's my guess,' said the Doctor, 'that someone brought you here. They

were aware of your attempts at dimensional transference, and sent forward the energy needed for you to actually make the jump.'

'But why forward the first time? And why so many stops along the way?'

'Perhaps they could only send you enough energy for short steps, instead of the whole journey.'

Penelope was nodding. 'They must want my machine for some reason,'

she said. 'But surely, if they can send such energy through time, they could construct their own time conveyance.'

'Small-scale projections like that are actually quite simple,' said the Doctor. 'But a working dimensional engine is something else again. Put the two together, and you have a functioning time machine.'

'It was a call for help,' concluded Penelope. 'Perhaps another time traveller is stranded here –'

'Or an alien or aliens. Someone with the technology to displace those packets of temporal energy.'

'– or in an even earlier epoch than this one. Wait, the time conveyance didn't stop working until we arrived here. . . that is, now. So they must be now. Doctor, it must be the galliform creatures that Mr Cwej was talking to.'

'The Kapteynians? That's an interesting possibility.' The Doctor shifted the table until Penelope could see the map. He rummaged in his pockets until he found a chewed pen. 'I've been doing some calculations. It's my guess their base is about here.'

He wrote a large KAPTEYNIAN BASE, ballpoint scraping the fine paper, just to make sure she didn't get lost.

Penelope peered at the map through her spectacles, but didn't take it in.

'What is the significance of a flock of butterflies?' she asked.

'A very bad omen, to the Japanese,' he answered, absently, annotating the map. 'A battle or a disaster. They're the souls of those who haven't died yet.'

‘Curious that I should dream about it. I hope it means nothing. I’m sure my own anxiety is represented by the room without any egress. . . ’

The Doctor looked up at her. She started. ‘What did you say?’

She thought she had offended him. ‘Perhaps you do not discuss dreams in your century –’ she began, but he had caught her wrist and his eyes were demanding she tell him the rest.

‘I went into a hut in a Japanese garden. When I turned to leave again,’ she said, ‘I discovered that the door had vanished.’

‘How many walls?’

‘Six.’

‘Was the ceiling low or high?’

‘High. Very high.’

‘What colour were the walls?’

‘They were – I don’t know, they were no particular colour –’

He took her face in his hands, suddenly, and her eyes went wide with indignation and alarm. He looked into them, hard.

‘You haven’t got a trace of telepathic ability,’ he said, letting her go. ‘So where did that dream come from?’

One button of her jacket had come undone. She was carefully doing it back up, blushing furiously, her eyes on the map. ‘Whatever its significance,’ she said, with barely restrained rage, ‘I am not some sort of biological specimen for you to examine and catalogue.’

He stifled his urge to apologize, scowling at a point on the wall behind her.

She said, ‘Despite the fact that we are fellow scientists, I feel you have treated me very poorly since we first met. I do not care a whit for how advanced you are, nor how far-flung the year you call home. Your ill manners are not excusable by an accident of time.’

She got up and stalked out of the room with utter dignity. He saw she had taken the map with her.

Which was all very well, but where had that dream come from?

And back in her room, the Caxtarid smiled around a mouthful of sea bream.

The more divided these aliens were, the better her chances.

‘I don’t know where to start,’ she said, bits of fish flying out of her mouth.

‘It all looks so good!’

Penelope wore a kimono. She had tucked her glasses away with her other few nineteenth-century possessions in a leather satchel. The matchlock lay across her lap.

116

She rode slowly away from Toshi. Reluctantly, she had to admit that she had half hoped someone would ride after her and stop her. Preferably the Doctor, with an apology.

She had the map, and enough food for several days. She knew where the others were going, and if her mission was unsuccessful, she could meet them there. And the avian people had seemed quite friendly.

She sat up straight, and set off with the same spirit of adventure in which she had launched herself into the fourth dimension.

It began to rain.

One of the horse handlers bowed low and handed Chris a piece of paper. He thought it was the bill, and was halfway to the Doctor’s room for a translation when he saw it was written in English.

‘Dear Chris,’ it said. ‘Have gone to investigate something. Please go on ahead, I’ll catch you up.’

Chris shouted several extremely filthy words. The only reason he was not instantly thrown out of the inn was that no one could understand them.

And in her room at a different inn, Te Yene Rana eyed the Doctor and took out her favourite torture device.

117

13

Manacle depression

Wednesday 22 May 1996, subjective time

Probably March 1560, local time

Dear Diary,

I managed to get one of the pages to give me a lesson in etiquette. According to him, I was doing everything wrong, from the way I was sitting to the way I was talking to where I put my eyes.

I don't know whether it might've been better to just be a barbarian, and sit on the wooden floor cross-legged and talk out of turn. I've met aliens – and humans – who'd be impressed by that kind of stuff.

Probably not. This lot are all so polite and reserved it's amazing they don't explode. It's all very Spock – it's not that they're emotionless, it's that the emotions are buried under the surface. If you show anger, you lose face.

So I've got to do everything right, or at least, as right as I can. But as my dad would say, the product does the selling, not the packaging.

And have I ever just made a sale.

After making me watch the execution, they made me wait for ages in an anteroom. Every time the door slid open and I thought it was my turn to go in., some samurai would appear, bow over the threshold, and go into the daimyo's guest room.

At last one of the pages gestured me in. I did the bow without looking too stupid, and knelt/sat in front of Gufuu Kocho, lord of Han, Daini and Sanban districts.

I think I'd gone a bit funny by that stage. I wasn't going to be able to wow them with toys or technological curiosities. If I didn't come up with something, something huge, I was going to be Joel Mince.

The guy is short, but from where I was kneeling, he looked about twenty feet tall. His hair is white – a bit prematurely, I think, he's not that old. He's got a hard, hard face and nasty eyes, like a tough general out of a war movie.

But he hides it behind the good manners and the soft voice.

‘You say you have knowledge which could help me,’ said Gufuu. ‘What do you have to say?’

‘Your Majesty,’ I said, sounding like a complete schmuck, ‘I’ve travelled here from a distant land, a very distant land. I brought with me as much of the knowledge of, er, my people as I could fit into this device.’

I had the PowerBook with me. An attendant pushed one of those eensy tables over to me, and I put the computer on it. The daimyo waited, probably thinking I was nuts.

‘I wasn’t sure at first what kind of machinery or information you might find useful,’ I said. ‘But at last, I realized what I had that you could use.’

I turned the PowerBook around. The daimyo leant forwards, peering at the faint screen. The attendant obligingly moved the little table closer to him.

‘That illustration shows a machine called Jacquard’s automatic loom. In my country, weaving is done by large, complex machines, instead of by hand, using a spindle. The machines can weave far more quickly and efficiently.’

The daimyo looked up from the PowerBook screen. I was really surprised by how readily he’d accepted it. A good sign. He said, ‘This mechanism would be of use to me if I was a merchant. How can it help a warlord?’

‘I’m glad you asked,’ I said. ‘With modifications, that machine is capable of much more than just weaving. . . ’

And then, dear diary, I explained how to build the world’s first computer.

Brief explanation. The earliest computers were based on the Jacquard loom.

The thin sheets of perforated wood it uses to weave complicated patterns became paper punchcards, and so on. The Analytical Engine used punchcards –

so does Penelope’s time machine; I’ve seen the little box she keeps

them in.

All very steampunk.

I was trying to convince the daimyo how much more efficient his military record-keeping would be with the help of a *konpyuuta*, but he was already having all sorts of thoughts about how it could be used – record-keeping for his estates, building stronger castles.

God help me, I think I've just introduced Computer Aided Design to the sixteenth century.

The idea, of course, is to see what good I can do here while the daimyo is playing around with his overblown calculator – and it'll be years before *that's* built. I'll have to gradually unload the secrets of my mystic laptop as they're needed. And I'll have to make sure they're not misused.

That's enough to keep any techhead busy for the rest of his life.

The thing now is to make sure that life isn't a very, very short one.

* * *

120

Te Yene Rana held the device up to the lamp, turning it in her hands, lovingly.

It was soft and warm, a few inches of cybernetic life, dark and flexible as leather. The *Prompter of Confessions*, in the dark tongue.

She was in a much better mood.

Her prisoner watched from the corner. 'My people have become experts in the design of these living machines,' she told him. 'One such device is the creature that prevents you from moving.'

He glanced at the animal embracing his left ankle. The *Manacle of Flesh*, a variation on the *Prompter of Confessions*, designed to partially inhibit the motor nerves. He could move, albeit slowly and awkwardly. And speak. And scream.

'This device,' she said, crouching in front of him so he could see it wriggling in her hands, 'will give me complete control over your tactile senses. I will be able to make you feel anything I choose. Pure heat, as though your nerves are on fire. Utter cold. And pain.

Unimaginable pain. Wherever I choose, for how long I choose.'

He didn't try to resist as she knelt beside him and began to fit the *Prompter of Confessions* behind his ear. He'd written the false note for his friend readily enough, almost as though he wanted the human to be on his way – or was it just that he didn't want to risk displeasing her?

The Prompter snuggled against his skin, reaching down his neck to seek out his brainstem, and up to his temple. 'The device will swiftly seek out the centres of your brain which controls pain perception, forcing open any pathways which may have closed to inhibit the agony, multiplying the sensations I cause you a hundred times. The real genius of the device is that it simulates pain without causing physical harm.'

She would begin a finely controlled programme of stimulations, beginning with several high-level shocks to loosen him up, and then building, slowly, with variations, to a roaring crescendo of agony. All without asking any questions, of course. By the time she was finished with him he'd tell her anything she asked him.

She was just deciding whether to gag him when he plucked the *Prompter* off his head and tossed it out of the window.

She shot to the windowsill and looked down into the street, where a large cart was running over the *Prompter of Confessions*, mashing it into a pancake.

She turned back to him with murder in her eyes.

'Can't we talk about this in a civilized fashion?' he said, plucking the *Manacle of Flesh off* his ankle.

She managed to catch it before it went out of the window.

* * *

121

Penelope rode through the cool morning. She hadn't seen anyone since she'd left Toshi, except a wandering monk and a couple of merchants who had ignored her.

She took out the map while her horse ambled along the forest trail. She was less than half a day's easy ride from KAPTEYNIAN BASE.

She hoped that by now the Doctor's conscience was pricking a little at his behaviour towards her. She imagined him as one of those dreary university professors, taking it on themselves to lecture her on Woman's Place or something equally antiquated.

'Ah,' she could imagine him saying, 'you're one of those Suffragettes, aren't you?'

'Suffrag *ist*,' she would correct, fiddling with her spectacles in irritation.

'What you have to understand, Miss Gate, is that the male and female of the species have completely different psychologies. Men's brains have been prepared by evolution for their role as thinkers, artists and leaders. The male mind is naturally more rational. Have you never considered, for example, why so few great painters were female?'

'I had always assumed it was because it was illegal to train women in painting,' she would reply. 'Have you never considered that these supposed differences in the minds of the sexes are merely a convenient excuse for perpetuat-ing their current circumstances?'

In one version of her daydream, this lead into a fascinating discussion of Darwin, Marx and the Pankhursts, and a conversion of the offending professor to the cause of emancipation. In the more realistic version, the lecturer droned on painfully for some minutes about the scientific evidence for Woman's Place, et cetera.

She was barely tolerated in the universities. She had hoped that men of the future would be somehow – *better*.

Besides, he still scared the life out of her.

She swallowed her disappointment as she rounded a bend in the road, and saw the two samurai waiting for her, their hands on their sword hilts.

14

The writing on the walls

The Doctor had ordered tea for them. Te Yene Rana watched in astonishment as one of the innkeeper's children delivered the tray. The Doctor returned the child's frantic bows and sent it on its way,

sliding the door shut.

‘What was it you wanted to talk about?’ he said, pouring a cup of the pale, alien fluid.

It was no damned use. Te Yene Rana sat on the floor in front of him, aghast.

Her extensive training in interrogation suddenly seemed to have a large damned gap in it. She had been taught how to deal with all of the subjects’

possible responses – confessions, lies, pleas, even madness. She had emphati-cally not been trained to deal with a subject who took the piss. Thanks.

‘Let me guess,’ said the Doctor. He raised his tea cup in both hands, and inhaled deeply, smiling at the scent. ‘You’re interested in a certain object which, shall we say, made a crash landing in this area.’

‘You know where it is?’

‘You know what it is?’

Te Yene Rana scowled and fell silent. The Doctor said, ‘We call it. . . the pod.’ He took a mouthful of tea and smiled blissfully.

‘It’s a consignment of goods,’ she said, grudgingly.

‘What sort of goods?’

‘If you must know,’ said the Caxtarid, ‘it’s a smuggled shipment of Oolian knickers.’

‘Don’t the Oolians have enough underwear of their own?’ said the Doctor.

‘It’s not *for* the Oolians,’ said Te Yene Rana. ‘I just want my goods back – they were accidentally jettisoned during an act of piracy by a Kapteynian vessel.’

‘Ah,’ said the Doctor. ‘They tried to nick your knickers.’ He poured another cup of tea. ‘All this overkill about underpants? I don’t think so. Why don’t you tell me what’s really going on? I might be able to help.’

‘All right.’ Te Yene Rana let him hand her a cup of tea. ‘The truth is,

it's a survey satellite. Natural Resources Admin have been considering whether to 123

mine this planet. We needed to take a census of the planet's inhabitants, in order to develop a least-disturbance model for the project.'

'And the Kapteynians?'

'Rival miners,' said Te Yene Rana. The tea had a strange watery flavour, like flowers. 'They sabotaged our satellite. Without that survey, we can't get permission to touch so much as a pebble.'

'Hmm,' said the Doctor. 'I think I preferred your first story.'

'What?'

'In this time period, the Kapteynians aren't your economic rivals: they're your slaves. For another thing, when did the Caxtarids turn green? Your corporations have stripmined a dozen inhabited worlds.'

'Green?'

'Never mind. Suffice it to say that unless your planet has changed its com-mercial laws very suddenly, the underwear was a lot more believable.'

Te Yene Rana put down her cup. 'Damn you,' she said. 'Who are you? Tell me. I'll reciprocate with the truth. You have my word.'

'Right. I'm the President of the Intergalactic Flora Society.'

'Thanks. That's very helpful. The thing is a vital component of my ship. The Kapteynians sabotaged it. My ship's in orbit – I can't leave until I repair it.'

'You know,' said the Doctor, 'I can keep this up all night.'

'Gonads!' said Te Yene Rana. She looked around for something to throw at him. 'Why isn't there any damned furniture!'

He just managed to dodge the teapot as he lunged for the window.

Penelope was continually amazed not to be dead.

When she had seen the samurai waiting for her in the road, she had resigned herself – to capture at best, slaughter at worst, or the large

number of alarming possibilities in between.

But one of them had said, ‘ *O-jochu*, it is not safe for an unaccompanied woman to ride through this forest. There are brigands and rude peasants at every turn. Allow us to accompany you to the castle of our lord, Gufuu Kocho, who offers his protection.’

It wasn’t an invitation. Scowling inside her hood, Penelope let them flank her horse, and lead her off in completely the wrong direction.

It took several hours, riding between the stoical samurai, to reach the castle.

White walls rose behind brown stones, curved roofs and barred windows, tier after tier.

There was a massive gate where the samurai shouted for entry. The great wooden doors pulled slowly open – servants dragging the doors’ weight, servants kneeling in the dust as they rode in.

Every eye was on her. She imagined she could hear the gossip drifting softly on the breeze.

Once inside the palace she had only one guard, and just a lad, and he had put away one of his swords. But one young samurai with one sword was more than enough. Even if she somehow got away from him, she doubted she could find her way, back to the gate – and who was going to let her through it?

He stalked the polished cedar floors in his slippers, doing his best to look forbidding, while she walked just behind him in bare feet. ‘Please excuse me,’

she said, ‘but where are you taking me, *O-samurai*?’

‘To your quarters, *O-jochu*,’ replied the boy. ‘Here we are.’ He slid open a door. Penelope had no idea how he’d recognized the right one in this maze of wooden passages.

The room was, as usual, large and empty. There was a screen at one end, delicately painted with an image of geese in flight. ‘I will see to it that you are brought food and drink, and whatever other comforts you require,’ he said.

He even bowed, a little. ‘Someone will always be on hand if you need them.’

She returned the bow, and he slid the door shut. He might as well have locked it.

Penelope slid to the floor, sitting European style, and put her head in her hands. Her mind was churning with penny-dreadful fantasies. She forced them down, feeling her rational mind struggling with her equally rational fear. No one had threatened her. Yet. No one had mistreated her. Yet.

She wasn’t important. What they wanted was the pod.

She felt suddenly, overwhelmingly tired. All she wanted to do was curl up on the thick straw mats and fall asleep. But even with her eyes closed she stayed relentlessly awake. Distantly she could hear the footsteps of people moving through the house, sometimes catch a shout from the courtyard or a raised voice from another room.

Trapped, she thought. Trapped again.

She blinked. The light had faded. . . or had the paper walls turned dark and hard?

Penelope sat up. She was in the Room With No Doors.

‘Oh no,’ she said. ‘Not again.’

Chris had been sitting in his room at the inn, eating shrimp and moping.

Whatever the Doctor had gone to investigate, it was taking him forever.

The cab chase had been great, just like old times, taking him back to when he flew a flitter for the Adjudication Service. Skimming through the buildings like a knife, scaring the bejeezuz out of some perp by being smarter and braver and fasten The poor cab had just managed to limp into Toshi town before the 125

back axle had finally and spectacularly snapped, nearly throwing them off the cab.

He’d got some paper, and dug a chewed-on ballpoint pen out of the Doctor’s satchel when the Time Lord wasn’t looking. After a while he

started to write:

‘Dear Doctor, I didn’t always feel like this.’

He stuck out his bottom lip at the piece of paper. Goddess, it was like a

‘Dear John’ letter. ‘This is tragic,’ he said out loud. ‘I’m going for a walk.’

He decided to go and see how the blacksmith was getting along with the pod. He walked through the muddy streets of the town, peeking into shops and trying to ignore the stares he got. He should be used to it by now, after visiting a hundred different planets and times, and sticking out like a sore thumb in most of them. This time he wanted to shout, ‘Yes! I look weird!

Don’t you guys realize what a *cliché* it is to stare at me?’

Toshi was a lot bigger than the little town where he and Chiyono had bought the horses. Most of the people were what Chris guessed were middle-class –

craftspeople, bureaucrats, merchants. There was the occasional peasant, but he didn’t see any samurai. He guessed they were all off at the war.

The blacksmith’s store was a wide, tidy space. The blacksmith himself was a portly, white-bearded old man, quite well-off, judging from his clothes. What was he called again? O-Kajiya. The Doctor had said they were in luck – the man was an expert swordmaker, a genius when it came to metal. Better still, he had a cart for rent.

‘Yeah, but what does he know about alien pods?’ Chris had asked. ‘What if it’s a nuclear bomb?’

‘If it’s a nuclear bomb,’ said the Doctor, ‘which it isn’t, it won’t make any difference whether it goes off in the stable at our inn or at the blacksmith’s shop.’ He drummed his fingers against his chin. ‘Besides, I don’t want it with us, in case the samurai catch up with us.’

Chris had shrugged. If the pod was really important – like, world-destroying or history-changing – they’d already know. But it wasn’t. On a cosmic scale of things, they were chasing around after a bit of insignificant space junk. The world wasn’t going to end – nothing important was happening to him or the Doctor.

People had already died because of that piece Of junk, he reminded himself, as he walked up to the blacksmith's shop. He sighed. The whole thing was so *stupid*.

The blacksmith and two assistants were buzzing around the pod, which was lying in the cart. They'd done a great job, loosening and chiselling away the fused soil, even polishing the metal of the outside. It looked like a brand-new, er, whatever it was.

They bowed low when they saw him. Chris returned the bow, feeling guilty, 126

partly because he was a fake samurai and partly because he didn't know how much danger they were in from the pod.

Of course, if the Doctor thought the thing was dangerous, he would never have left it with them, and it had been pretty inert for a while. . . . On the other hand, there were the people who wanted the pod. . .

Samurai-san,' the blacksmith was saying, 'I'm very glad you called. The statue is ready to be collected, and your horse's damaged shoe has been replaced. Isha-sama paid us in advance, of course. All is in readiness, but I was wondering if you could kindly tell me more about this object.' The blacksmith laid a hand on the pod's smooth surface.

'I wish I could,' said Chris. He had no idea what the Doctor's cover story had been. 'I don't know very much about it.'

'I have never seen such fine metal, nor any metal object which resembles this.' The blacksmith seemed to consider for a moment, then said, 'I must inform you, honoured customer, that I had a strange visitor last night, asking if I had seen an object similar to this.'

Alarm bells went off in Chris's skull like a bad hangover. Oh great. He remembered to be polite. 'Please tell me about your visitor, O-Kajiya.'

'It was a pale-skinned woman, with hair and eyes like copper,' said the smith. 'Very beautiful, but very frightening. One of my lads thought she was a demon.'

Lady Justice's brastrap, thought Chris.

'She asked if I had seen any unusual metals – if perhaps someone had brought me a sample I could not identify.'

'What did you tell her?'

‘Be assured, samurai-san, that I did not mention your statue. She was very impolite, and I could not be sure of her credentials.’

Chris bowed again. ‘You did the right thing, O-Kajiya. I’m grateful.’ One of those alarms was still going off. ‘This was last night, right?’

‘ *Hei.* ’

Chris frowned. He didn’t like that timing. ‘I better tell the Doctor about this. We’ll come back and collect the pod and the horses soon.’

The blacksmith bowed. Chris bowed. And legged it in the direction of the inn.

In the dust of a Toshi street, the *Prompter of Confessions* was stirring. It had been thoroughly squashed by a cartwheel, the indentation taking up most of its stubby length.

But the biomachine’s powers of recuperation were considerable. It had replaced thousands of damaged cells in the last few hours, run maintenance 127

cheeks on its simple nervous system and sensory apparatus. Its single, sluglike belly-foot was ready to begin the slow task of taking it home.

It would seek out its mistress again, be repaired and recharged, and continue with its vital mission of wringing the truth out of prisoners and slaves.

They had been through dozens of missions together. The *Prompter*’s juices flowed more quickly at the prospect of getting back to work.

It gave its belly-foot an experimental wiggle. There. Almost back to full functionality. Carefully, feeling its strength returning, the *Prompter of Confessions* began to make its way through the dirt.

The Doctor ran past, laser bolts missing him by inches. The *Prompter* reared up in recognition for a moment before falling back into the dust.

Te Yene Rana trod on it as she raced after the Time Lord, swearing, and the reflattened *Prompter* expired with a squeak of protest.

This time she wasn’t alone.

The Doctor knelt – sat – facing away from her, so close to one of the walls that his nose was almost pressed to it.

‘No,’ said Penelope, pushing her hands against one wall. ‘No, not this again!’

It was a nightmare, of course, but so vivid! She felt that she could reach out and touch the fine cloth of his jacket, or tweak a lock of his dark hair.

He turned around and peered up at her. She started.

‘What are you doing here?’ he demanded. But his voice was tired now, as though all the pride had gone out of him.

‘Oughtn’t I to be asking you that,’ she quavered, ‘since this is my nightmare, and you are, apparently, a guest in it?’

He shook his head. ‘Some random force,’ he muttered, settling against the wall, ‘desperately lashing out in confusion, bringing together disconnected things. . . ’

She sat down in the middle of the floor. ‘What is this place?’

‘Hell hath no limits,’ he said, ‘nor is circumscrib’d in one self place, where we are is Hell, and where Hell is, there must we ever be. . . ’

‘Doctor Faustus,’ she said. ‘It seems an oddly comfortable Hell.’

‘Wait a few centuries and say that again.’ He gave her a crumpled smile, holding his hat in his hands.

‘Is this, then, the Hell of the time traveller?’ She hugged herself. ‘Are we condemned by our meddling to this timeless place?’

The Doctor shook his head. ‘This room isn’t for you. And it isn’t for Chris, as much as, deep down, he believes he deserves it.’ He sighed. ‘I’m afraid it’s for me.’

‘And what crimes have you committed,’ she said softly, ‘that warrant such punishment?’

He looked at her with his deep and mournful eyes. ‘What do you know about reincarnation?’

‘Ah,’ said Penelope. ‘You are a believer in the transmigration of souls. That you will return as a snail, or perhaps an amoeba. ‘

‘Not exactly,’ said the Doctor. ‘What if I was to tell you that in the. . . century from which I come, we can “die” twelve times, returning in a new body each time?’

‘I see,’ said Penelope.

‘I will be moving on to my eighth body. A new body with a new personality.

A whole new self.’

‘And what will become of your current self? Oh, I see. . . ’

Penelope looked up at the high ceiling of the Room. ‘Is this the price you must pay for your multiple lives? How can you, people accept such a terrible price for their longevity?’

‘It’s not them. Us. It’s me. This is a space in my own mind. The others have got it ready for me.’

‘The others?’

‘My past selves. And now they’re being childish and showing it off.’ He snorted. ‘They hardly need to. I knew this was going to happen to me. Even before the dreams started, I knew. That’s one reason I’ve held on for so long.’

‘A strange form of cruelty. . . ’

He pulled his knees up close to him. ‘Nothing more than I deserve. I did this to the one before me, after all, locked him up and threw away the key.’

Penelope shook her head slowly. ‘But why? What did *he* do?’

‘Nothing. That was the problem.’ The Doctor seemed to grope for a simple way of explaining. ‘He was afraid, afraid of going power mad. He was so scared of what he might become that he wouldn’t do what needed to be done.

He refused to plan, refused to anticipate. He’d never consider a pre-emptive strike against evil because he was too scared of even being capable of planning one. People were dying because I didn’t know what I was doing.’ He looked up at Penelope. ‘So I had to make a change.’

‘And imprison him in a Room like this one.’

The Doctor nodded. His eyes pleaded for her to understand. ‘He hates me.

He’d tear me apart if he ever got out. I know it., Penelope shook her head. ‘Why are you telling me this?’

‘Don’t blame me,’ said the Doctor. ‘It’s your nightmare, remember.’

‘Then you have two choices.’

‘Oh yes?’

‘You can stay in hell.’ He looked at her in astonishment. ‘Or you can win.’

* * *

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Penelope woke up with a start. Someone was timidly knocking on the frame of the paper door.

‘Who is it?’ she yelped, sitting up. Her head was blurry with afternoon sleep, the dreams already fading.

The door slid open an inch. ‘It’s me,’ said Mr Mintz.

‘Mr Mintz!’ Penelope scrambled to her feet. ‘Are you all right?’

‘Fine,’ said Mr Mintz. ‘I’m fine.’ He slipped into the room and shut the door.

‘Are you all right? They didn’t, you know – you’re OK?’

‘They treated me with courtesy, as far as it went in the circumstances,’ she said. ‘The Doctor said you were kept here as a hostage. I expect I’m to he another.’

‘Yeah, well, things have changed a bit.’ He hesitated. ‘I need to talk to you.’

She realized he was waiting for her to sit down first. She picked up a cushion and sat on it with her legs sideways. He sat, Japanese-style. ‘I’ve made a deal with the daimyo,’ he said.

Penelope felt her heart sink. ‘What sort of deal?’ she asked, reluctantly.

‘OK,’ said Mr Mintz, ‘I’m going to be completely honest with you.’ She nodded, waiting. ‘I’m planning to stay in this time period,’ he said.

‘Was this what you intended from the beginning?’ She took his wrist, suddenly, startling him. ‘You used me!’

‘No!’ Mr Mintz shook his head. ‘Look, Penelope, I mean Miss Gate, let’s just skip the whole blaming and angst session. This is the way things are. I’m going to teach the daimyo to make computers.’

‘ *Computers*,’ said Penelope. ‘Analytical Engines? Mr Mintz, this is such a basic villainy that I cannot believe you would even contemplate it!’

Mr Mintz blinked at her. For a moment, she thought he was holding back tears.

‘It’s too late now,’ he said, pulling his hand out of her grip. ‘I’ve made the deal with the daimyo.’

‘It’s not –’

He held up a hand. ‘It’s done. Don’t bother arguing about it, OK? There isn’t time. The question now is – what about you?’

‘What about me?’

‘If I can convince the daimyo that you’ll work with me, he’ll probably let you live. Otherwise you’re just a foreigner with no right to be here. No rights at all.’

‘Unless I can lead him to the pod,’ said Penelope.

‘You know where it is?’

She looked at him. ‘No,’ she said firmly. ‘I do not.’

‘Well, do you know anything more about it? Did the Doctor find anything out?’

‘I don’t wish to have anything more to do with him.’

Mr Mintz said, ‘Then you’ve got all the more reason to cooperate with Gufuu-sama. We’ve got no choice.’

‘You planned this from the beginning,’ said Penelope. ‘You chose to –’

‘Yeah, and you chose to leave the Doctor.’

‘To find the Kapteynians, not to pervert history! Imagine if, using your *computer*, Gufuu –’

‘Don’t start,’ said Mr Mintz. ‘I’ve *thought* about the consequences, OK? I’m not going to “pervert” anything.’

Penelope sat back, glaring at him. ‘How can I persuade you to abandon this foolish and dangerous path?’

‘It’s too late,’ he said again. ‘Listen, Miss Gate, think about this. Back in your own time, no one took your invention seriously, did they? Well, imagine if you could build a better one! A faster, bigger Engine.’

‘With sixteenth-century engineering?’

‘Don’t be fooled. Their metallurgy is streets ahead of what Europe’s managing at the moment. And they’ve got me to give them a push in the right direction. Think about it, Miss Gate. We could really make it happen.’

She got up and walked away from him, arms folded, head down. He watched her, the corner of his mouth twitching up in frustration.

‘I had thought,’ said Penelope, after a long interval, ‘that time travellers would share certain common characteristics. A desire to explore and discover.

An equal desire not to tamper with or destroy what they were exploring.’

Mr Mintz opened his mouth, but she held up a hand for silence. ‘I was wrong. This society of time explorers I imagined, this honourable society, doesn’t exist. There are only isolated renegades, out for themselves.’

Mr Mintz’s mouth had turned down at both corners. He looked at the floor.

Ashamed or resigned?

‘Therefore,’ Penelope went on, ‘I renounce my imagined society.’ She knelt down and opened her bag. ‘I brought the plans for my time machine, though I was obliged to leave the real thing behind. Present me to this Gufuu-sama.

If I have no choice but to remain in this situation, I must make the best of it.' He was looking at her in astonishment. 'And perhaps someday – we will create a fully functioning version of my time conveyance. And then I'm going to leave.'

Everyone was running in the opposite direction to Chris. He fought his way through the blackened, shouting crowd, back towards the inn, into the smoke and panic.

He didn't stop to think. Running on instinct.

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The building opposite the inn, some kind of gambling parlour, was roaring with sooty flame. The fire had spread to three houses already. Terrified-looking men were throwing water into the blaze, uselessly.

Chris waved his arms as a great puff of smoke billowed down on to him, blinking the stinging heat out of his eyes. There was a figure lying in the street, halfway between the two houses, covered in dust and ash. He made a beeline for it without even thinking.

He grabbed the Doctor and turned him over. There was an impressive sear mark on the left shoulder of his jacket.

'Wooden buildings and energy weapons,' Chris muttered. 'Bad combination.'

The Doctor coughed, shouted something about the world dissolving, and came to, brushing soot from his eyes. 'Chris,' he said.

'Let's get you out of here,' said the Adjudicator, lifting him up.

'Let's get the pod out of here,' he said. 'There's a Caxtarid agent running about. Probably a slaver.'

'A woman with copper hair?' said Chris, helping the Doctor out of the smoke.

'Metallic red, yes. And very unpleasant. She wants that pod badly enough to kill for it. She thought she'd done just that.' The Doctor looked back at the raging fire. 'She may well have killed someone. Blast! I should have had more sense than to bring the thing to a population centre, especially after what happened to Hekison.'

The Time Lord was striding towards the blacksmith's, looking left and

right.

Chris said, ‘Here’s hoping she split when the fire started. I’m just glad you didn’t go off and leave me.’

The Doctor clapped his hand on Chris’s arm. ‘You’ll be fine. I’m not sure how much the Caxtarid cares about publicity.’ He scowled, wiping soot from his nose. ‘We can’t waste any more time. We have to collect the cart, the horses and the pod, and drive as hard as we can for Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery.’

‘Leaving a trail of destruction behind us,’ sighed Chris.

‘That’s what I’m hoping to avoid,’ said the Doctor.

That was when the troop of samurai came out of the smoke.

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15

Cat and mouse

Wednesday 22 May 1996, subjective time

Probably March 1560, local time

Dear Diary,

I refer you to the entry for 30 December 1999

Dear Diary,

I knew I should have listened to the Doctor, whose advice always makes good sense. Besides, I knew that messing about with history was a Bad Thing. So thank goodness I didn’t decide to go ahead with whatever it was I was planning.

As I suppose you know, dear Diary, I didn’t write that.

gulp

There were at least a dozen samurai, driving wildly out of the smoke. Chris caught flashes amongst the motion, frightened faces, purple banners.

A flurry of energy bolts punctured the black smoke, searing pink light

like loosed arrows, following perfectly straight trails up into the sky, or smashing into buildings with a puff of flame. A horse screamed, nearly throwing its rider. Chris grabbed the Doctor by the collar and pulled him out of the way of the panicked animal's hooves.

The Caxtarid ran barefoot into the street, coming out of the smoke with her red eyes glittering like a bad flash photo. Anyone who hadn't already screamed and run screamed and ran. Including the firefighters, who abandoned their buckets and took to their heels.

'Where'd those samurai come from!' Chris shouted, over the noise.

'They probably came to fight the fire,' said the Doctor. He didn't have to shout; his voice overrode the background noise.

'Where's Penelope?' shouted Chris.

'She left in a huff.' He looked up at the Adjudicator. 'Or possibly in her time machine?'

Chris shook his head. 'It's still safe in the blacksmith's store.' Well, as safe as it could be in a town that was burning like a bonfire.

The braver samurai were riding in circles, charging the Caxtarid and weaving away as she let loose her energy bolts. 'Get the pod to the monastery.'

'What?' Chris actually reached out to grab the Doctor's collar again, but the Time Lord had run right into the middle of the conflict.

'Go!' shouted the Doctor, as he bolted past the Caxtarid. She swore and swung to cover him.

Chris was amazed to find himself running down the street, away from them, towards the blacksmith's store.

He looked back, once, but he couldn't see the Doctor in the middle of the fight. The thatched roof of a house exploded into flames, showering the street with tiny bits of burning straw. Chris covered his face and turned and ran.

Aoi couldn't decide whether to be excited or disgusted. Was it an honour, being assigned to guard the foreign woman, or was it an insult? His father hadn't said anything about it, except to wish him

good luck.

Aoi glanced over at the woman. She was riding with a frown on her face, as though deep in thought. Gufuu-sama had said to keep her safe – she had promised to show them a working version of the other *gaijin's* machine, though Aoi wasn't too sure what all of that was about – and more importantly, not to let her run off. They weren't sure of her loyalty. If she tried to escape, they would have a very clear picture of it!

But she hadn't tried to slip away: she'd just ridden along, in silence. Thinking. Aoi wondered what it must be like to live in a country where the women built machines. Though it was some kind of weaving machine. How that was going to help Gufuu-sama, Aoi had no idea.

He wouldn't have minded the job so much if she'd taken the trouble to paint her teeth black, like any normal woman. Did all barbarian women have teeth like naked bones? Aoi shuddered. At least she didn't smell. None of the foreigners did, unlike the unwashed barbarians his father had talked about.

So much was going on, and they'd told him so little about it. He felt as though he had been plunged into deep water without first being taught to swim.

'Tell me something about these people we're going to meet,' he said.

Startled out of her reverie, she looked over at him. He wondered how old she was. She didn't look too old, maybe the age of his oldest sister.

'Well,' she said, 'they're a little hard to explain. They're birds.'

'Birds,' repeated Aoi.

'Large, black birds. But they're not just birds, they're people. They have hands, and they talk.'

' *Tengu!* ' said Aoi. 'I heard a rumour that some *tengu* had come out of the forest. Have you seen them?'

The foreigner nodded. 'It's my theory,' she said, 'that they somehow affected my time conveyance, bringing it here.' Aoi had no idea what she was babbling about. 'If the Doctor's map is accurate, and we can

find them, they may be able to make it operate again. Besides, I wish to discover what their purpose was in bringing me here. Or more accurately, in bringing the machine here. . . '

She trailed off, her brow furrowing. Thinking again.

Aoi took out the map and checked it once more. By now they must actually be somewhere under the large foreign writing. Not more than a *ri* from the *tengu*'s camp.

When he looked up again, they were surrounded.

The samurai captain paused halfway up the hill, turning back to look at Toshi town.

It was ablaze. The fire had jumped easily from wooden building to wooden building, chewing through the town as though it was made of crumpled paper. He could see crowds milling about outside the wall of the town. People watching their homes burn.

The troop had seen the fire as they came over the hill on their way to Umemi-sama's castle. Their detour had ended not in succour for the towns-people, but in disaster.

He looked around at his troops. The ones who had survived. Some had been smashed from their horses by the demon fire. One had died as a burning wall collapsed on to him.

The man sitting behind him on the horse took off his hat in what the captain assumed was a gesture of respect. The foreigner's face was dusty and sooty, making it hard to tell what his expression was.

The captain couldn't quite remember how the little man had ended up sharing his horse, only that he had been there ever since they had left the town.

'Terrible,' the little man said. 'Try to fight the fire, and you only fan the flames.'

The foreigner noticed the captain, who had half turned in his seat, looking back at him. ' *Sendoo-sha ni okutle kudasai,* ' the man said.

The captain blinked at him. 'I beg your pardon?'

'Take me to your leader,' the man repeated patiently.

Chris felt as though he had been driving forever. His mind had gone

into neutral, and only his hands and his eyes had been guiding the horses along the roads. If you could call them roads.

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Abandoned again.

His spine felt as though all the individual vertebrae were about to fall out, and he was covered in small bruises. He hadn't seen anything else on wheels since leaving Toshi, and after a while he'd realized why: the countryside was so rugged that it wasn't even worth building good roads. He hoped no bits of the cart fell off. He doubted he could repair it.

What if he just stopped driving? What would happen if he didn't take the pod to the monastery? What if it was another red herring? What would happen if he just buried it under a ton of rocks, or dropped it into a lake, where no one would ever find it again?

And what the hell was it with Kosen's student?

He nearly drove past the villagers without really seeing them. A flurry of shouts caught his attention, and he gently tugged the reins, until the horses decelerated to a stop.

He turned in his seat as Mikeneko and Kame ran up. The others struggled up behind them. 'Should you not be at the monastery by now, Kuriisu-san?'

Kame asked, not bothering with greetings and etiquette.

'We stopped in Toshi,' said Chris glumly.

'We saw it burning,' said Mikeneko. She shook her head mournfully. 'We had hoped to take shelter there on our way, but now –'

'Look,' said Chris, 'This thing is like a magnet for disaster.' He jerked his thumb at the heavy shape of the pod. 'Are you sure you want to keep heading in the same direction as me?'

Mikeneko said, 'We have no choice. We sent whoever we could to stay with relatives in nearby villages. Without the monks' help, we won't survive.'

Chris nodded resignedly. 'I'll try to get as much distance between us as I can,' he said.

‘Watch out for *shinobi*,’ said Kame. ‘Gufuu and Umemi have agents everywhere. We were attacked in the night. I was only able to save the villagers at the cost of my own life.’ He gave a lopsided, slightly insane grin.

Chris left them behind on the road, and pounded ahead. He had to get this thing to the monastery, and hope that the Doctor would catch up with him there. He had no idea what the Time Lord was planning once they’d got the thing to safety.

A lump of panic banged around in his chest as the cart negotiated the rocky road. What if the Doctor didn’t turn up? What if it was just him now – no more Benny, no more Roz, no more Doctor, just Chris?

The lump got into his throat. He blinked back the tears, and drove on.

The Kapteynians had built a camp in the forest. Penelope saw they had constructed three large nests, each one presumably shared by a few of the birds 136

for warmth. There was a carefully cleared patch of ground in the centre, a charred circle marking the spot where they lit their fire.

Talker was sitting on the ground, legs and wings folded. The others watched from the trees, or their nests, waiting patiently while their spokesman dealt with the humans. Even though Penelope had watched Mr Cwej’s conversation with them, she still found herself light-headed at the thought of talking birds from other worlds.

Aoi, the page, was sitting on the ground with his mouth hanging open.

Talker pecked the ground. ‘We are slaves,’ said the bird. ‘We *were* slaves. We were being transported from our own world, which circles Kapteyn’s Star, to the Caxtarids’ home, the fourth planet of Lalande 21185. They’d been training us as shock troops on the ship, which wasn’t too clever of them.’ The bird squawked and ruffled its feathers. ‘We fought our way free during a Jovian fuel stop, and escaped here in a shuttle.’

Penelope frowned thoughtfully. There was something about the Kapteynian’s explanation that was puzzling her, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on it.

Still, even if some of the details were over her head, she could follow the gist of it. ‘We have something in common,’ she told the bird. ‘We’re both cut off from our own worlds, in a new and dangerous

environment. I propose we assist one another.'

'What can you do for us, hairy?' said Talker rudely.

'I think you know,' she said. 'Why else did you bring me here?'

'We didn't,' said Talker. 'Excuse me.' The alien squawked, stood up, and laid an egg.

Penelope experienced a moment of intense revulsion, followed by a moment of revelation. She stared at the egg, astonished.

'Don't even think it, hair boy,' said Talker. She picked up the egg in the little hands at the ends of her wings.

'No,' said Penelope, 'I'm female too. You're a soldier, and you're female.'

Talker shrugged. 'Think with one end, lay eggs with the other, no problem.'

She rolled the egg underneath her and sat down on it. 'I used to be a gardener.

If I ever get back to Kapteyn I'm going to spend a year just pulling worms out of the soil.'

'Is it going to hatch?' They both looked up at the page's voice. His eyes looked as though they were about to jump out of his head.

'No,' said Talker. 'There's no time for lovey-doving. But sitting on eggs makes me feel better.' She settled into place. 'OK, Misht Jate, where were we before I rudely ovulated?'

* * *

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Umemi-sama was sitting on a stool in the courtyard castle. The samurai charged up to him, dismounting and bowing, and the Doctor followed suit.

The daimyo gazed down at them for a moment, while the dust settled. He was a good ten years younger than Gufuu, with a thick moustache and a thick waist. His clothes were purple, with white plum-blossoms patterning the cloth. A row of advisers in full armour, one with his face mask in place, sat at right angles. The yard was full of troops,

sitting in geometric rows.

The captain said, ‘My lord, we’ve just come from Toshi, where we tried to stop a fire. The blaze was started by a demon with a rifle that shoots flame.

We also found this foreigner, called Isha, who begs an audience with you.’

Umemi took the bizarre report without flinching, which worried the Doctor.

The warlord beckoned to the Doctor, palm down. The Doctor inched forward in the dust.

‘Umemi-sama,’ he said, ‘I’ve come to warn you about a very dangerous object. Very dangerous indeed. It seems as though anyone who comes into contact with it suffers terrible luck.’ The daimyo said nothing, sitting forward on his stool, listening. The Doctor heard the silence around them, the wind softly moving banners. The troops stood stock-still, almost eerily silent. Far away he could hear the calls of men drilling with their weapons. ‘I’ve seen a village destroyed, when they thought the object would bring them luck. The object reached Toshi, and within a day the town was afire.’

The daimyo considered for a moment. ‘What is your advice, Isha-san?’

‘Avoid the object,’ said the Doctor. ‘Act as though it doesn’t exist. Let its curse fall on someone else.’

The portly daimyo shifted back in his seat.

‘Listen to me,’ he said. ‘Since I became lord of this province, I have done everything I can to hold Gufuu-sama’s ambition in check.’ He gestured with his fan. ‘When Gufuu wants a piece of land to the cast, I also want that land.

When Gufuu covets a river to the south, I also covet that river. Whatever advantage he seeks, I seek the same advantage. In this way, I have maintained balance between our two situations.’

‘Through constant war,’ said the Doctor.

‘Of course,’ said Umemi. ‘And now, Gufuu-sama wants this object, this *kami* that descended from the heavens. He has gone to great lengths to obtain it, sending troops, and even destroying Toshi.’ The Doctor

opened his mouth to correct the daimyo, but the man went on speaking. ‘If he wants this *kami*, then I want it. My agents have sighted your ally, making all speed, but not towards Gufuu-sama’s castle. To another place of safety? To Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery, perhaps, where you first learnt of the *kami*?’

The Doctor was careful not to let his surprise show. He had that sudden sinking feeling he sometimes got during chess, when he realized his opponent 138

had been patiently watching his combinations and seeing through the lot.

‘Look,’ he said, ‘whatever this thing is, it’s not worth risking outright war over it. Let it reach the monastery. I promise you Gufuu-sama won’t get his hands on it.’

‘Alas,’ said Umemi, ‘Gufuu’s troops are already on their way to the monastery. His agents have also been following your friend’s movements, it seems. Besides,’ he added, ‘I know what it is.’

This time the Doctor felt his mouth open slightly. Umemi was glancing off to his left somewhere.

The Doctor followed the man’s gaze. One of his war advisers was removing his – her – helmet.

Te Yene Rana showed her pointed teeth, red eyes flashing in the late afternoon sun.

‘Bad news travels fast,’ she said.

‘We didn’t bring you here,’ Talker said again.

‘Then how did I get here?’ insisted Penelope. ‘If the Doctor was right about my time conveyance, it couldn’t have reached this era under its own power.

Someone drew it back here.’

‘Might have been the Caxtarids, I suppose,’ said Talker. ‘I don’t know much about their technology.’ She pecked at the ground, thoughtfully. ‘Their ship was pretty badly damaged. Could your time machine be used to travel just through space?’

‘We’ve done just that,’ nodded Penelope. ‘I was hoping that you might

be able to make the machine work again.' She glanced at the page, who wasn't following any of this. 'Er, because Gufuu-sama wants a demonstration.'

She and Talker looked at each other, and Penelope felt the understanding travel between them. If they had a working time machine, they could escape.

Of course, thought Penelope, she could always go back to the Doctor and ask for a lift. She felt the angry colour rise in her cheeks. No. She would do her best to puzzle this out without his assistance.

Te Yene Rana was showing her teeth. 'I decided to strike a deal with the obvious winning side,' she said, giving Umemi-sama a little bow.

The daimyo said, 'I myself will lead a large expedition to the monastery.

We will recover the pod, destroying any troops Gufuu-sama sends against us.

When we possess the pod, we will further use its magical powers against our rival. I shall become warlord of Han, Daini and Sanban districts.'

The Doctor was looking at him in a mixture of exasperation and anger. 'That will end the warfare you object to, Isha-san,' he laughed. 'When I am overlord of the country, there will be no more war, I promise you.'

He barked an order to his troops. They shouted, a single roar, and were suddenly, furiously, in motion.

The Doctor stood up, forgetting etiquette. 'You can't let this happen!' he shouted at the Caxtarid. The advisers were on their feet, generals and captains joining their troops as they readied for battle. 'You can't get all of these people involved.' She was just grinning her predatory grin at him. 'For goodness'

sake,' he shouted, 'what is that thing? Why is it worth all of this death and destruction?'

'Wouldn't you like to know?' She stalked over to Umemi, utterly ignoring the rules of etiquette, and leant on his shoulder. The daimyo

didn't seem to mind. 'We ought to bring him. He'll be a damned handy hostage if his friends give us any trouble.'

Umemi barked orders, and the Doctor found himself grabbed by two samurai large enough to blot out the sun.

'You don't care, do you?' He was still shouting at the Caxtarid. 'You think this *is funny*. You're like a child pouring boiling water into an anthill.'

She stepped up to him and grabbed his face in her hand. 'Are their motives any better – in the long run?'

'Tell me what the pod is,' he insisted, his eyes boring into her.

She just laughed and let him go. The samurai dragged him off 'When they're finished with you, Doctor,' she called, you can expect torture and death.'

'You must be such fun at parties!' His hat had fallen down over his eyes.

He couldn't see her, but her last barb reached him, even across the movement and noise of the courtyard.

'Not from me. I'll let them do it,' she called. 'It'll save me the damned trouble.'

16

Fourth-dimension dream

Chris crept through the forest, keeping as low as he could. He hid behind a thick pine and peered out at the soldiers.

The army stood eerily still, like mannequins, lined up in tidy rows. Lancers and archers, marksmen and infantry, like full-size metal figurines in a tabletop wargame, or holographic characters in a sim, too perfectly aligned and still to be real. They were small, and after a while Chris realized it wasn't their genes or their diet, but their age. They were teenagers, or in their early twenties, younger than he was.

In the middle of that lot, beneath the orange banners, was Gufuu-sama.

And maybe Joel. Chris wanted to see if he could spot the redhead amongst the troops, but he didn't dare break cover.

What were they waiting for?

The superior warrior knows when not to fight, as well as when to fight, supposed Chris. You could lose face by losing your cool. They were waiting to see who would blink first.

He'd left the cart and horses deep in the forest, maybe two hours ago. In that time he'd carefully recced the area, making a mental map – the road that wound up to the monastery gates, the plain at the base of the mountain, the shape of the forest that surrounded it. As far as he could tell, no one was sneaking around in the woods. The soldiers were just standing there, waiting.

How was he going to get the pod up to the monastery? The main road was in plain view of Gufuu-sama, from the warlord's position on the ridge.

Maybe he just couldn't. Maybe he'd have to stay here until he found out what they were waiting for. He took the letter out of his pocket. It was just about finished.

Dear Doctor,

I didn't always feel like this. I kind of wanted to try to write down how I feel. Maybe I'll never show you this. Maybe it's just to help me make up my mind.

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I always wanted to be a hero when I grew up. Like my dad and his dad and so on, one of the good guys. That was the best thing about the Adjudication Creed, taking the Oath and everything. It was all written down, you knew exactly how to do things and why they were done. . .

All the different procedures and situations, and the legal precedents and civil rights safeguards. That was in the last exam of all, as though the Academy thought it was the least important part of our training, even though it was the most important part.

I got my best mark on that exam. Well, out of the theoretical stuff.

Roz always said I did everything by the book.

At first I thought it was because of Roz, After she died, I felt so, well, dead. And I know it wasn't easy for you either, but I thought I'd got over it OK.

And then I thought it was Liz. For some reason it was even worse when Liz died. OK, for some reason, for a very good reason. I let her die. I let her die to save me. I utterly failed to serve and protect. I wasn't a hero.

But it wasn't a single thing, really. It's a bunch of little things. Each time some little bad thing happens some innocent bystander gets killed, something beautiful gets destroyed – you think you've got over it, and then something else happens. Each time you think, great, from now on everything will be fine. And it never is.

You must be tough as nails to have done this for over a thousand years.

I don't think I can do it. I think maybe I've done about as much as I can. I'd really like to get back to being a hero. Find a job that needs doing, people who need protecting or a planet that needs to be freed or something, and stay in one place, in one time, dealing with one problem.

And try and be a hero again.

Roz would say there aren't any heroes, just rookies and idiots. That everybody has flaws and weaknesses. Except you, I guess.

I didn't mean that to sound so mean. But listen – I think the reason you've been trying to teach me so much is so you're still around when you're gone.

I don't think I can be you. I mean, not just because I'm about four bazillion times less smart and experienced. I can't be you. Nobody can be you. You're stuck with it.

I mean, I like all the stuff you've been teaching me. You've given me so much – a place to live, all these adventures, all these new experiences.

You saved my life, and Roz's, right back at the beginning.

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It wasn't Shakespeare, but it said what he wanted to say. He pulled out the ballpoint pen and added the last lines.

I really hate the thought of losing you. Maybe that's the real reason I want to stop now, to go away. So I won't be there when it happens. I don't know. I hope not. I don't want to jerk out on you, not if you need me.

So if there's any way I can stop, if it's OK for me to pick a planet and stay

there, can we talk about it?

Yours sincerely,

Chris

A shadow passed overhead, and another. Chris looked up, for a weird moment convinced that there were planes in the sky.

A third dark shape moved through the air above the trees. It was the size of a small man, floating silently against the blue brilliance of the morning.

'Oh *cruk*,' said Chris, as the penny dropped. He headed back for the cart as fast as he could.

Penelope and Talker entered the clearing, looking around carefully.

The

Kapteynian held her strange weapon at the ready. Penelope was uncertain how wise it would be to actually fire the thing in the woods, given its effect on the timber buildings of Hekison, but for the moment it was their only protection.

The cart stood to one side of the clearing. The horses were tethered to different trees, grazing peacefully. There was no one here.

'I wonder what the story is here,' Talker clucked. 'Where's Ke Risht hair boy got himself to?'

'Talker –' began Penelope. 'Wait a moment. Do you have a name? "Talker"

sounds as though it's a title.'

'Names, yes, most of the species on my planet use personal names. We birds don't, though. I was called Gardener. Now I'm Talker because I do the talking.'

'Don't you find it confusing? I can't imagine life without some way of dis-tinguishing between people.'

Talker shrugged. 'I know who I am.'

The Kapteynians had spent an hour flying over the forest., taking careful note of the lie of the land. Penelope had dispatched Aoi to

report on their progress – his lord's army was very visible, waiting on a nearby ridge.

'No pod,' Talker announced.

'Mr Cwej must have taken it with him. Perhaps he's even reached the monastery by now.'

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'Why would he leave this?' Talker slapped a wing against the side of the cart. 'He can't lift that pod, not even big muscly hair boy.'

'A good question,' said Penelope. 'Perhaps someone met him here and helped him on his way. The cart could be a diversion of some kind.'

'If he's around the place,' said Talker, 'my lot will find him.'

Penelope stood on tiptoe and looked into the cart. Her time conveyance! It seemed to have survived its rough journey.

'This is it, is it?' said Talker, behind her.

'It is. The Doctor considerably modified it, but I have the plans here, with his revisions.' Penelope extracted the rolled-up papers from her leather satchel and spread them out on the seat. 'Good grief, the man's handwriting is virtu-ally illegible.'

Talker clucked with amusement. 'So, do you think we can go somewhere with that thing?'

'Penelope!' said a voice. It was Mr Cwej. Talker spun around and nearly shot him.

Mr Cwej put his hands in the air. Talker was twice her normal size, feathers puffed up like the fur of an angry cat. 'OK, hairy, where's the pod?'

'Safely inside the monastery,' he said.

'Sure, sure. How'd you get it up there?'

'The secret entrance, of course,' said Penelope. 'I am right, am I not?'

'Erm,' said Mr Cwej, trying to feign ignorance.

'I knew it,' said Penelope. 'Gufuu-sama said to be on the lookout for

it.'

'You're working for Gufuu?' said Mr Cwej. 'When did that happen? I thought you were the one who didn't want to get involved!'

'Mr Mintz presented me with some convincing arguments,' said Penelope, suddenly uncomfortable.

' *Joel* is working for Gufuu?' Mr Cwej looked so outraged it was almost comical.

'Yes, he is. We are trying to make the best of a desperate situation.'

'You don't need to do this. If you just want to go home, the Doctor –'

'I do *not* want to go home,' thundered Penelope, surprising herself. 'And I see no reason why I should trust the Doctor rather than this daimyo. At least the warlord's motives are clear.'

'The Doctor's just trying to stop people getting caught In the crossfire.' Mr Cwej scowled. 'And now you're working for one of the people doing the shooting!' He looked at Talker. 'Can I put my hands down, please?'

'OK,' said the bird, 'but I'll southern-fry you if you try anything.'

'Look, Miss Gate,' said Mr Cwej. 'All we want to do is find out what the pod is, and stop it falling into the wrong hands.'

'Who are you to say Gufuu-sama's hands are any more wrong than Umemi-sama's?'

'What? Neither of them should get the pod. As long as it's still around and people think it could help their war effort, they'll fight over it. We have to find out what it is, and get it to safety, or destroy it. No more pod, no more fighting.'

Talker's feathers had puffed up again. 'That pod belongs to us,' she said.

'You give it back to us, and we'll take it offworld.'

'Can't,' said Mr Cwej. 'Not until you tell me what it is.'

' *Who's* got the gun?' said Talker, waving the weapon. 'Anyway, you

don't need to know what it is. You just want to make sure the humans don't get it or fight over it. We'll collect it, we'll just leave. Sound fair?'

'Look,' said Mr Cwej, 'the thing is obviously some kind of weird weapon.

How do I know you won't grab it and take over the Earth?'

'External genitalia to this,' said Talker. Penelope felt herself blush. 'I'm gonna bonk you over the head and leave you halfway up a tree. Then I'm going to fly up to the monastery and. . . '

'And what?' said Mr Cwej.

'I just had a thought,' said Talker. 'To, awk, do what I need to do with the pod, I need someone who's dead. Technician ate a worm he shouldn't have the first night we arrived here.'

'Don't look at me,' said Mr Cwej. 'I'm just a pilot.'

'The Doctor,' said Penelope. 'He's from a technologically advanced future.

Might he have the skills you need?'

'It's a thought,' said Talker. 'Let's get him.'

Mr Cwej shook his head. 'We were separated when Toshi caught fire. I don't know where he is now.'

Talker squawked. 'You're a bunch of no help.'

Te Yene Rana was saying, 'These daimyo have the right idea. You've got to keep the damned little people *little*, you know? Tax them till the pips squeak, keep them out of any decisionmaking processes, burn down their houses from time to time. When they complain about it, kill them off in large numbers.'

She gripped the reins, guiding her beast of burden around a tree. Umemi-sama's army was riding slowly and surely across a broad plain. In the distance, the mountains rose up.

About a dozen of her probes were skimming along behind her. The rest, deactivated in her room at the inn, had gone up in smoke with Toshi town.

‘Peasants are cheap and plentiful,’ she continued. ‘If they make poor workers, at least they make good fertilizer. They’re a faceless, homogeneous mass, easily controlled. It’s only the exceptional ones you have to worry about.’

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‘Fascinating as this is,’ said her prisoner muffledly, ‘I don’t think I see your point.’

‘The rabble-rousers. The whackos. . . You know the sort of thing. I was there when we invaded Kapteyn 5, you know. The place was a madhouse.

Sixty sentient species, crammed together in four continents and two oceans.

Bugs, birds, humanoids, it was like a damned zoo! But we sorted it out. We exterminated four races, made deals with eight, and enslaved the rest. Tribute system: they hand over a percentage of their population each year. Some of them are damned useless – we just eat them.’

‘I know all this,’ said her prisoner. ‘I’ve read Historian’s *Account of the Kapteynian Peoples*.’

‘Never heard of it,’ said Te Yene Rana. ‘Anyway, my point is, these daimyo have the right idea. Keep that pod out of the hands of the peasants. Let

’em have the guns, if it keeps them happy; with any luck they’ll be too busy shooting each other to bother with him. Petty wars on Kapteyn 5 made our invasion a pushover. And anyway, you’ve got more guns, and bigger guns.

But imagine if the peasants got hold of something you didn’t have, something more powerful. . . ’

‘The villagers weren’t planning to overthrow the government,’ said the prisoner. ‘They just wanted the soldiers to leave them alone.’

‘Ah,’ said Te Yene Rana, ‘but what if one of them had realized its potential as a weapon – and had actually done something with it?’

She glanced back at him. The Doctor shifted slightly, looking appallingly uncomfortable, bound and draped over the back of her

horse.

‘What kinds of torture do they have here?’ she wondered.

‘Oh, do shut up,’ replied the Doctor.

Penelope appeared in normal space ten feet above the ground. She fell into the vegetable garden and lay there, winded. A cog rolled out of the time conveyance and down the slope. I’ll fetch you back, she thought at it, when my brain is once more functioning normally.

The Doctor had called it a ‘hyperwalk’. They had discussed the possibility briefly while he was adding notes to the machine’s plans. He had calibrated the device to travel instantly from one point in three-dimensional space to another, the way they had travelled from Hekison village to the forest.

But that required destination coordinates.

Penelope rolled over in the dirt, feeling the world not spin around her, the opposite of spinning, as though it was terrifyingly stable and hard. She reached out to the time conveyance, and removed the punchcard from it.

There was only a single hole in the card, just a single instruction to enter the fourth dimension.

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She had walked up the mountain, the heavy machine wrapped in her arms, sometimes through the air and sometimes through the rock, seeing the back of each tree as well as the front, moving in a direction she had no name for, until she had walked through the wall of the monastery and entered normal space at an angle that had knocked the air out of her lungs.

Everything looked so simple, so solid, so normal. Her mind was settling back down. The human brain had never been meant to perceive the world in four dimensions.

Her hand shot to her heart. She pressed her fingers urgently against her chest, feeling the pulse echoing deep inside, and relaxed. Her heart was still on the left side.

It would have been so easy to give in to the strange tuggings she had felt, allow her body to turn itself inside out or back to front.

‘I never want to do that again,’ she said out loud.

She looked up – *up*, thank God, up – at the figure standing over her. She could see only the front of the woman’s head, thank God.

‘What are you doing in the vegetable garden?’ asked the monk.

The two armies faced each other across the plain. The purple and orange banners were silent in the still air. Joel was uncomfortably reminded of the pieces on a chess board the moment before the game started.

They had given him a sword and even a gun, but those were mostly for show – he could fence, but he had no idea of how to fight with the heavy longsword, and less idea of how to use the matchlock.

Gufuu-sama sat on a stool at the centre of his troops. The warlord gazed out across the plain, silently, his face hidden inside his helmet. He had not moved for hours, not even when scouts and messengers rode or ran up and bowed, delivering their observations of the enemy.

Gufuu hadn’t even moved when Umemi’s army had come into view, troops slowly appearing above a ridge at the opposite end of the plain. The soldiers were the same, the marksmen quietly watching the enemy, the samurai absolutely still in their saddles. He envied them their calm. It was almost as though they didn’t care – no, that wasn’t it at all. Their backs were rigid, their bodies poised for instant action. They were *focused*, so focused they weren’t thinking about anything but here and now, not death or consequences.

Joel’s heart was hammering. He didn’t want to be here. Not in the middle of these soldiers, on the verge of a battle, in Japan, in the sixteenth century.

This wasn’t what he had planned. But then, he hadn’t planned *anything*, had he? He’d just got this great idea about making his little mark in history, and jumped in feet first.

He thought of all those half-finished projects sitting around on his computer. The fanzines that had never got to issue one, the *Professor X: The New Adventures* submission he’d been mucking around with for two years. All the unanswered e-mail that was never going to be answered.

It was too late to turn back now.

Maybe there wouldn't be a battle. Maybe there'd be nothing to fight over.

Maybe the pod was already taken care of. Maybe they'd all see sense, that there wasn't any need to fight, that it would be a senseless waste of human life.

'Maybe,' said Joel out loud, 'monkeys will fly out of my butt.'

The two samurai on either side of him turned to look at him. He shrank down in the saddle and wished he was dead. Figuratively speaking, of course.

Chris waited half an hour to make sure he was alone again.

Penelope had gone to the monastery. He hoped. He'd tried to talk her out of using the time machine, but she'd been so certain she knew how to make it do what she wanted. . . when she'd turned into a Picasso woman, with two surprised eyes on the one side of her face, arms reaching into nothing he could do. Either she had been right, or she was trapped in the fourth dimension, or she was smeared across space-time like a distorted painting, and there he couldn't help her.

Talker had shrugged, squawked and flown off. It was time for her to bring the Kapteynians back together.

Chris reached into the cart and grabbed the collapsible shovel. He'd had a bad moment when Penelope had started to rummage through her store of adventuring equipment, but she hadn't noticed the fresh dirt. He'd knocked as much of it off as he could, but you couldn't disguise that rain-garden soil smell.

He straightened the shovel out, and went to check on the pod. He had dragged it thirty metres through the undergrowth, turning back to try to cover his tracks, sweeping the leaves around with his hands. Then he'd moved the cab to another clearing.

It wasn't that well disguised, a big mound of dirt and leaves; there hadn't been time to dig more than a few feet deep. Still, it wouldn't be visible from above, and you'd have to decide to search the forest to find it. No one knew where the thing was, except him.

He'd done it. He hadn't got it into the monastery, but it was safe for now, and no one could find it.

Chris followed the trail he'd created in his mind. The big pine, with a chunk missing where he'd whacked it with the shovel. The oddly shaped stone.

The pod was quietly digging its way out of the ground.

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Chris gawped at it. Little chunks of dirt were leaping up into the air at irregular intervals. There was already a line of dirt around the shape of the pod, like a bath ring.

For a moment he expected something to come clawing up out of the earth, like a vampire out of its coffin, knocking the lid free and digging its way towards the light. Towards him.

He took a few, hesitant steps towards it. 'Hey,' he said. There was no answer. 'I thought you were inert or something. I hope you didn't mind being buried. . . '

There was silence for several seconds. Chris listened, as hard as he could, but there was nothing.

Another little piece of dirt flew up into the air.

He sighed, and went to dig the pod back up.

The chief monk was a wizened old fellow with a stare that made Penelope want to blink a lot. She knelt on the floor of his large, empty room. The monk had helped her carry the time conveyance here.

'Why are you here?' he said.

'Is this a philosophical question?'

'No.'

'Oh.'

Penelope put her head in her hands for thirty seconds.

'Very well,' she said. 'I'm here because Gufuu-sama asked me to break into the monastery and find the secret entrance. This is because an alien pod is being brought here by a time traveller from the thirtieth century.' She began to count on her fingers. 'Gufuu-sama wants the pod, Umemi-sama wants the pod, the Kapteynians want the pod, the Caxtarid wants the pod, and the Doctor. . . ' she trailed off. 'He doesn't

want the pod – he just doesn't want anyone else to have it.'

The old monk nodded, as though she'd just commented on the price of rice.

'The reason I'm telling you all of this. . . ' she said. 'Actually, to be honest, I'm not sure why I'm telling you this. I'm not entirely sure why I'm doing any of this.'

'Perhaps that is why you are telling me about it,' said the old man.

Penelope folded her hands in her lap. 'I am at a loss,' she admitted.

Kadoguchi-roshi considered. 'What do you want?'

Penelope said, 'A divorce.' And broke into a huge smile.

'Then what steps must you take to accomplish that goal?'

I need to go home,' she said, in a small voice.

'And how can you return home?'

'I can't use my time conveyance,' she said. 'It doesn't work properly. I'll have to. . . ask the Doctor to take me home.' She put a hand over her face.

'Oh, no.'

'You can trust him,' said the monk firmly.

'Who *is* he?' Penelope breathed. The Roshi didn't answer. 'What must I do?

What is the right thing to do?'

The old monk said nothing.

'Then I must ask the Doctor,' she said. 'Swallow my pride, put up with *his* pride, and ask him.' She sighed. 'If he has a redeeming feature, it is that he always knows what to do.'

Te Yene Rana had dragged the Doctor down from her horse. He lay on the damp grass in the shadow of the ridge. They were a little distance from Umemi's army, the soldiers lined up in neat rows, paralleling the

enemy.

‘Aren’t you going to join in the fight?’ said the Doctor. Te Yene Rana was an angry silhouette against the sun, stalking back and forth. ‘I would have thought wholesale slaughter would be just your cup of tea.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ she said. ‘You might like getting mixed up in their damned politics, but I’ve got more important things to worry about. Thanks.’

‘Yes. This pod of yours. I expect your superiors will be very annoyed if you don’t return with it.’

‘Nah,’ said the Caxtarid. ‘This is personal.’ She crouched down beside him, tugging his bonds to test them. ‘Those scrawny flea-ridden Kapteynian slaves almost destroyed my ship. I want them. And they want the pod. If I find it, I find them.’

‘But what if they use it against you?’

Her pointed teeth flashed in the afternoon light. ‘Once they get to it, it’ll be useless. Assuming they still have that Technician bird with them. He’s first on my list. I’m going to fricassee him.’

‘Is *that* SO?’ said Talker, landing on the Caxtarid’s head.

The Kapteynian knocked Te Yene Rana flat, kicking her gun away. The Doctor snaked out of his ropes and snatched the weapon up. In a moment he had ripped loose the power source and smashed it under his heel.

Talker was screeching, battering her enemy with powerful blows from her wings. The Caxtarid was swearing mightily, bruising her knuckles on Talker’s beak.

More of the Kapteynians arrived. ‘Stay back!’ Talker squawked, ducking a punch. ‘Mine mine mine!’ The other birds hovered at a distance, watching the fight.

‘What’s happening?’ The Doctor caught the attention of one of the Kapteynians. ‘Tell me the situation.’ The bird peered at him with black eyes, wondering 150

who he was. ‘Tell me!’

‘The two armies aren’t moving,’ said the Kapteynian. ‘The monks are making ready for siege. There’s a small band of peasants entering the valley. Other than that, there’s nobody –’

‘Where are the peasants?’ said the Doctor. ‘We’ve got to warn them away.

Once the battle starts – if the battle starts – there won’t be anywhere near here that’s safe.’

The Kaptyenian shrugged and squawked. Talker and Te Yene Rana were still beating the stuffing out of each other.

‘Please,’ said the Doctor. ‘At least tell me where you saw them.’

The bird pointed a wing. ‘Coming up beside that river to the south-east.’

‘Should we try to stop the fight?’ one of the birds asked.

The Doctor said, ‘It’s too late for that. Hopefully the two daimyo will confine their attentions to one another.’

‘I meant Talker and –’

‘I know,’ said the Doctor. He grabbed Te Yene Rana’s horse and vaulted up on to it. ‘You’d better think of something, because there are four samurai riding down the hill towards you to see what’s going on.’

Talker and Te Yene Rana looked up, frozen in position. When they looked around, the Doctor was gone.

17

Time’s arrow

Joel knew he was safe while he was with Hanagami. The huge samurai was one of Gufuu-sama’s personal guard. The eight fighters stood around their lord, glaring out at the enemy, as though defying them to try to harm him.

Hanagami had been given specific instructions to look after Joel.

Joel peeked out from inside the fence of armoured men. Gufuu-sama

was utterly unmoved by the raging battle below, watching with the same cool interest with which he had watched a Noh play the night before.

A really good Games Master could get you to imagine you were in the thick of battle. They remembered to go beyond hit points and metal figures, and remind you of the smell of blood and gunpowder, the shouts and screams and pounding hooves. Of course, in a role-playing game, you were usually (a) fighting imaginary monsters and (b) in your living room, with a pizza.

Joel suddenly knew that if he ever got back to Little Caldwell, the Thursday night AD&D campaign with the guys from Newbury was off.

There was a group of enemy samurai racing across the foot of the ridge. As one, the riders turned towards them. Arrows were suddenly raining down.

Joel screamed. Hanagami took a bullet, grunting.

Oh God, Joel prayed silently, stuffing his knuckles into his mouth, oh God, I don't belong here, get me out of here.

Kame could smell the gunpowder for an hour before the villagers reached the valley. 'I don't like this,' he told Mikeneko. 'If the daimyo discovered Kuriisu-san's mission, the monastery might not be the safest place at the moment.'

Mikeneko glanced back at the surviving villagers. They were footsore and miserable and had no food. 'We must go on,' she said. 'There's nowhere else we can go.'

'At least allow me to scout ahead,' said Kame.

'But *O-samurai*,' she said, 'what if we're set upon while you're away?'

Kame considered. 'The forest ought to be safe,' he said.

* * *

153

The armies had crashed together like a pair of waves. It had taken Chris's breath away. One moment they were standing at opposite ends of the plain, perfectly still, and the next they were roaring towards each other.

He'd been kind of hoping that they'd do the traditional thing, some of the high-ranking samurai riding out to challenge their worthy opponents to single combat. Showing off, and gaining glory, and making sure their families got the reward if they were killed.

None of this was about honour, or any of that stuff. This was all about economics. About who owned the land and who got the rice, and whether the peasants had something they could use to stand up to you.

And besides, he thought, it was kind of childish to hope they would kill each other in a cool way.

The two armies didn't muck around. They just smashed right into each other and started hacking and slashing. Arrows rained down. The harque-busiers fired in synchrony, mowing down rows of charging horsemen. Small groups broke off from the main battle, shouting and wheeling.

The pod wouldn't stay buried. Could he get the cart up the hill without its being noticed? He doubted it – there were so many people down there that someone was bound to spot him.

Kadoguchi-roshi. He needed advice. Surely the old monk would be able to think of a way of protecting the pod.

Though Chris wasn't sure what the point was any more. He took one more look at the battle. The horsemen were riding over the dying and dead to reach their foes. He turned and went into the forest.

Kame rode to the top of the winding road, where the hill turned into the valley. He left his horse sheltering beside a great rock, and crept forward. The sounds coming from the valley made his heart sink.

The valley was filled with soldiers. The great crowd rippled with violence.

Two armies locked together, after years of minor skirmishes, the dams of their hate and ferocity bursting open. Standard battle tactics, nothing fancy, a lethal spray of bullets and arrows followed by a head-on charge.

Kame shook his head. This would have happened eventually, he felt sure of it. He merely wished their timing had been a little better.

He glanced down to the river, worried. The peasants were huddling together in a hollow, too afraid to make a fire in case the smoke drew attention to them. For a moment he imagined that each of them was a small, precious statue, easily destroyed if dropped or dashed to the ground. Fragile. 'Unlike you, Ese Kame,' he snorted.

There was no safe way to the monastery. They could go through the mountains, but it would take days – he wasn't sure the villagers could survive that 154

long. No, their best strategy would he to press on, staying under cover, and praying that the battle held the attention of the warriors.

Kame went back to his horse. With any luck, the tiny group was too unim-portant to slaughter.

His hackles rose as he made his way back to the forest, carefully, watching for the enemy – any samurai was their enemy now. He could smell gunsmoke, too close, and there were sounds of fighting – but the troops would avoid the forest, preferring the open plain where everyone could see their bravery.

'Me villagers were careful to keep their heads down. Even they could

smell the guns. ‘Quickly,’ he told them, ‘we’ll go deeper into the forest.’

Nearby, a samurai screamed an order to his troops. The villagers started to their feet, looking around. As one, they heard the hoofbeats coming up the path towards them.

‘Everyone!’ Kame stage whispered. ‘Run and hide!’

He leapt down from his horse, and slapped the beast’s flank, sending it meandering off into the trees. The poor animal was almost as exhausted as they were. If there were troops nearby, they’d be distracted by the horse.

The villagers hurried into the trees, looking around frantically for the source of the danger. Too close, too quickly. Kame stood in the clearing, hand on his sword. His body felt drained of energy. Would this be the time that he died –

truly died, not one of these mock deaths he was forced to endure?

He was confident that Mikeneko could lead her people to safety, as long as they were lucky enough to avoid further encounters. He felt oddly as though death would not be a mere trifle, but a positive relief.

He was faintly disappointed when the Doctor rode up to him.

‘I’m glad to see you’re still with us, Kame-san,’ he said, without preamble.

‘Is everyone all right?’

Kame glanced around at the forest, where the peasants were making a complete hash of trying to hide. ‘Yes,’ he said.

‘It’s not safe here,’ said the Doctor. ‘I narrowly avoided some groups of soldiers who’ve splintered off from the main battle. They’re running scared, shooting at everything that moves.’

‘Then there’s nothing for it but to make straight for the monastery, and hope,’ said Kame. ‘Everyone, come on!’

Someone screamed.

A second arrow fell into the forest, and then a third. The air was suddenly filled with the smell of gunpowder.

‘No,’ said the Doctor. ‘This can’t happen now.’

When they heard the gunshots echoing through the trees, the villagers cried out and ran.

* * *

155

Penelope dodged and ducked through the trees, keeping as close to the ground as she could manage. The samurai seemed intent on one another, paying little attention to the people she saw running back and forth, but there was no sense in taking chances.

She had to find the Doctor. It had become obvious that he was the only person who could resolve the situation. The only one who knew enough, had enough experience, to make everything come out the way it ought to.

She found him, somehow inevitably, at the centre of the storm. He was holding a small child who – oh, the poor thing had been struck by an arrow.

Penelope rushed forward. The Doctor turned his ashen face to her. ‘She’s dead,’ he said. ‘I thought I could save her, and now she’s dead.’

Penelope reached out. ‘Do not blame yourself,’ she said gently. ‘This is a terrible situation. Let me take her.’

The Doctor just shook his head. She decided it would be best not to insist –

he looked as though he was about to collapse. Penelope said, ‘Kadoguchi-roshi sent me to find you, and anyone else who needs sanctuary. There is a secret entrance to the monastery. Come, I’ll show you.’

He shook his head again. ‘Doctor,’ she said firmly, ‘we cannot remain here.

It’s far too dangerous.’ She tried to take the child from his arms, and his face crumpled up with pain, and that was when she realized the child had been shot dead while he was holding her and the head of the arrow that had penetrated the girl’s body was protruding from his back.

Joel had managed to drag the sword out of its scabbard. It was heavy, so heavy that the tip kept dragging down to the ground.

Not as though anyone wanted to fight with him, the little scrawny foreign guy wearing no armour and glasses.

They were swarming up the ridge, silently, each samurai finding a match.

The combats were short and brutal: one proper blow with a *katana* would take off a limb or sever a neck. Joel had seen Hanagami slice clean through an attacker's torso. The man had slid to the ground in two tidy halves.

Joel swung from side to side, spinning on the spot, but Still no one attacked him. He was panting, trying to grip his weapon with sweating hands, trying to look in all directions at once. All he expected was a sudden roaring as someone noticed him, a moment of startling pain, and blackness.

He really hoped they didn't cut him in half. It would be too gross.

He saw Hanagami die. He had seen the samurai who did it, struggling up to the top of the ridge. The man's banner had trailed behind him, snapped and dragging, and there were two of his own archers' shots in his back.

He had run at Hanagami, shouting a desperate challenge.

Hanagani

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whirled, plucking his sword from a corpse, and the two of them crashed together, and then Hanagami's head was bouncing down the hillside.

The man saw Joel, and came at him, limping and snorting with effort. Joel looked around frantically, but there was no one left, no one to protect him.

Even Gufuu-sama himself was locked in battle, his sword whirling around him like helicopter blades.

So Joel somehow managed to heft his *katana* and impale the charging man on it.

The guy fell right on him, knocking him flat. His arms and legs moved around for a bit, as though he was still working out how to kill Joel, even though he was dead.

Or maybe he just wanted to stick his fingers in his ears, so that he could die without having to listen to Joel screaming like a maniac.

Penelope's stomach had turned, but she'd gritted her teeth and snapped the arrow and drawn it out of the girl's body, gently pulling her away from the Doctor.

The time traveller was leaning back against a tree, at an angle. Two inches of bloodied shaft protruded from his chest, emerging from between his second and third ribs. His fingers were pressed to the wound, trying to hold back the bleeding.

The knifelike metal tip emerged from his back, a little lower. The arrow had sliced through him at an angle like the proverbial hot knife through butter.

'I knew something like this would happen,' he said dully. 'Actually, I'm surprised it took this long. How did you get up there?'

'I used my time conveyance,' she said. 'I modified it as per your suggestion, and went for a hyperwalk.'

'I'm impressed,' he breathed.

'The situation must be desperate,' Penelope joked gently.

He tapped the back of her hand with a finger. 'You are so far in advance of your time,' he said, deadly serious. 'You ought to have a place in history beside some of its greatest physicists.'

'And yet,' she said sadly, 'no one in the twentieth century has heard of me.'

He waved his left hand, vaguely. 'Time's fickle.'

'Doctor, I must remove the arrow from your back.'

'Best to leave it where it is,' he murmured. 'Some of the monks are doctors, they'll. . . ' He seemed to fade away for a moment, then looked at her, his eyes brilliant, almost relucent in his grey face. 'It's not as bad as it probably looks.

We must get the villagers back together. They've been scattered.

Through the forest.'

'What of the battle?' said Penelope.

'Never mind that,' said the Doctor.

'But doesn't it matter who wins? What about history?'

'It's swings and roundabouts,' he said. He sounded as though he was going to sleep, which struck Penelope as dangerous. 'No, we need to sort out the villagers. . . the very man.'

Penelope turned. Mr Cwej was standing there, staring at the Doctor. 'Oh, Geez,' he said.

The Doctor lifted a hand, beckoning him over. 'Chris,' he wheezed, 'find the villagers. Take them up to the monastery. There's a secret entrance. Penelope will show you.'

'Wait a minute,' said Mr Cwej. 'We can't leave you here.'

'Take the pod with you,' said the Doctor. His voice was suddenly so quiet.

Penelope found herself taking his hand. His skin was frighteningly cold. 'Go on, Chris. I'm leaving you in charge.'

'You're not leaving,' said Mr Cwej, and Penelope realized that the boy was starting to cry. 'Forget it. No way. This isn't happening. No, you listen. We're not leaving you behind. I'll put you in the cart, and we'll drive you up.'

'You can't take the cart,' breathed the Doctor. 'Too conspicuous. Just go, Chris. There isn't much time. . . '

'Don't die.' Mr Cwej had taken the Time Lord's other hand. 'Don't go. I can't do this without you,' he wept. 'I can't.'

'Chris. . . ' breathed the Doctor. His eyes were closed.

'Oh my Goddess,' said Mr Cwej. 'You're going to regenerate, aren't you?

This is it, right here and now!'

‘No. Not this time. . . ’

‘You have to,’ said Mr Cwej, terrified. ‘You have to.’

The Doctor’s hands were limp and cold in their grasp. ‘Chris.’ His eyelids flickered open for a moment. ‘Forgive me.’

He breathed out, a long, weary sigh, and suddenly he was leaning against Penelope, slumped forward, his fingers limp in her grasp.

Mr Cwej shook him. There was no response.

‘Mr Cwej.’ Penelope put her hand on the man’s shoulder. ‘Chris –’

‘Oh man,’ said Mr Cwej. ‘This can’t be happening. He can’t just die by –’ He stopped, biting into his lip so hard Penelope thought it would bleed.

‘By what?’

‘Oh Goddess,’ said Mr Cwej. ‘By accident.’

158

Scream of consciousness

i

i

I.

I am.

That’s a start.

I am. How am I? First hints of sensation reaching me. Still a body out there.

I think.

No pain. Dull ache where my shoulder should be, the after-image of a healed wound.

I am still. No point in moving yet, or opening my eyes. Take the time the body needs to wake up.

I am. I am where? Not sure how much has happened. Present time:

one fuzzy black gap past the point when Chris finally turned up. Present place: no clue.

Will it be the Room when I open my eyes? Was that it? Did my body finally give me up? Have I crossed for good into the mental prison the others have prepared for me? Not sure. Don't think so. Feels different this time. As if I'm being touched all over my body, cradled even.

Realization. Relief. I'm alive. Some fuzzy dazed kind of alive.

Listen. Nothing. Nobody nearby, not even distant sounds of battle. Good.

They've gone on their way. Chris has gone on his way. Good. All I need to do is stay out of the way until he's been a hero. Then I make a dramatic return from the dead, congratulate him, admit modestly that I'd been playacting my death scene, that I'd misled him for his own good. He'll be upset; they always are. But he'll have made the choices he has to, and then he won't need me to be the hero for him any more. He'll have gone on his way.

Might be a good time now to open my *eyeeeeaaaaargh!* Pain. Dirt. Pressing on my open eyes close them close them! Grit under my eyelids. Hands won't move can't rub them. Weight on me. Earth holding me. Can't move. They've buried me. They've gone on their way. They've buried me.

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Won't scream. I don't scream. I don't lose control. My eyes are watering.

I can cope, I always do, no matter what they throw at me. I won't scream.

Keep the eyes shut tight. Keep them shut. Don't suck in that breath – all you'll get is dirt. Don't wonder how deep you are. Wonder how much dirt there is between you and that breath you want, between you and the people who've all gone away.

You'd think whoever's watching wouldn't begrudge me one little tiny scream. . .

But I can't open my mouth.

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Third Slice

No sword

‘

’

– Buddha to Mahakasyapa

18

Meanwhile, back at the monastery

Penelope did a quick head count. ‘I think we have everyone,’ she said.

Mr Cwej’s face was quite calm. Almost blank. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘Up the hill as fast as we can go, and in through the secret entrance. I’ll take it up in the cart,’ he told Penelope. ‘You can ride shotgun.’

‘What about you?’ Penelope asked Talker.

‘We’ll fly up,’ said the Kapteynian, jerking her wing at the sky. ‘And meet you there.’

‘Shall we run ahead of you, *O-samurai*?’ Mikeneko asked Mr Cwej. The woman’s voice trembled with exhaustion and suppressed grief.

‘No,’ said Mr Cwej. ‘We’ll all stay together. Put the wounded and the kids into the cart, as many as you can fit.’

There were perhaps two dozen surviving villagers.

Penelope helped

Mikeneko cram the cart. Five children, a man who’d been knocked to the ground by a samurai’s passing horse, a woman who’d been shot through the arm. Penelope had been glad of the ointment and bandages she had brought along.

Three more children clambered into the cart, chattering, watching the Kapteynians take flight. Black wings flapped amongst the trees for a moment, and then they were gone.

Penelope sat beside Mr Cwej in the driver’s seat. As they started moving, she glanced back to make sure the children were hanging on safely. She couldn’t help smiling. One of them had caught a

Kapteynian feather, and they were passing it around, fascinated. There was life left in some of the inhabitants of Hekison village, at least.

She glanced at Mr Cwej. The young man was still so calm. It couldn't be helped. There was no time to deal with what had happened now. First they must reach safety.

Behind them, in a clearing deep in the forest, there was a grave. It was not marked with any headstone, not even a cross of twigs.

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Mr Cwej had dug it for the pod. It had taken five of them to pull the mysterious object clear, once it had miraculously uncovered itself.

They had lowered the Doctor's body into that shallow resting place. Penelope had removed the arrow from his shoulder, and taken off his jacket and hat. There was no shroud, no priest, nothing but the need to quickly put him to rest so that they could make all speed to safety.

Mr Cwej had seemed paralysed. Once he had helped her lower that small body into the grave, he stood by the side, neither speaking nor moving, clutching the Doctor's jacket in one hand, the collapsible shovel in the other.

Penelope had awkwardly arranged the Doctor's hands on his breast. He looked so cold in his shirtsleeves. She wished for something to cover him with. But there was nothing but soil.

She stepped up out of the shallow hole. Mr Cwej held the shovel, still rigid, his eyes locked on the corpse.

Penelope put her hand on the shovel. 'I will do it,' she said.

'No,' he said. The word was tiny and flat. He thrust the jacket into her hands. She was surprised by the weight of it – the pockets were filled with objects. There was something ghoulish about retaining it, but who knew what might be of use to them? Penelope bowed her head.

And Mr Cwej had begun to shovel the scattered dirt back into the hole.

The battlefield was quiet.

Te Yene Rana sat on the daimyo's war stool, whistling while she replaced the power pack of her laser rifle. Umemi's headless body was

a little distance away, being fussed over by his advisers.

She had a great view of the plain from here. It was jammed with bodies, men and horses, a great pile of meat. Hundreds of them, maybe thousands.

Te Yene Rana was fond of sims of primitive violence, but they seldom showed this part of the battle, when the bacteria and the carrion birds were the only moving things.

Shame none of the cadavers were Kapteynian. On the other hand, it meant she'd get another crack at them. Especially that damned Gardener. This time there wouldn't be any of this cutesy personal-combat stuff. She'd blow the damned chattels into the middle of next week, first chance she got.

She supposed you could call Gufuu-sama the winner of this little skirmish.

He was still alive, after all, and more of his warriors had survived. Mind you, even he was holding his ground, waiting for reinforcements before he proceeded to the monastery and his rightful prize.

She looked up at the great craggy rock, crowned by Doa-no-nai-heya Monastery. No doubt, in all the confusion, the Doctor and his company had 164

made it up there by now. If Gufuu-sama wanted the 'Pod', he'd have to lay siege to the monastery.

No doubt he could use an additional warrior.

She slung the laser rifle over her arm and started picking her way through the bodies, heading down the ridge. If the samurai saw her, they took no notice.

A gold pocket watch which tinkled like a music box when you opened it.

Kadoguchi-roshi was watching the proceedings in the monastery courtyard.

He didn't seem surprised, even though the place was full of peasants and aliens, and there was a large Penelope-shaped hole in his vegetable garden.

Kame had bowed to him with great deference, and as it turned out had once been his student. He explained the situation while Mr Cwej made sure the peasants were fed and their wounds treated.

A transparent, folding wallet, filled with nonsensical business cards.

A group of shaven-headed monks and the Kapteynians were carefully unloading the pod from the cart. Two more were leading the weary horses away.

The monks were trying hard to look as nonchalant as their Roshi, even though they were surrounded by giant, chattering black chickens.

A hand-knitted toy bear.

They carefully laid the pod on the ground.

The Kapteynians crowded

around it.

Mr Cwej said to Talker, 'Now what?' His voice was as tight as a bowstring.

'Now nothing,' said Talker sadly. 'Technician is dead, and he was the only one who could have opened it. Except. . . '

Penelope put down the tweed jacket, and carefully began arranging the objects she'd found in its pockets. 'OK,' said Mr Cwej. 'We'll have to think of something. For a start: what is it?'

Talker shook her head. 'I can't tell you.'

'Why not?' Mr Cwej's voice was getting quieter. 'After all the people who've died because of it, I think we deserve an explanation.'

Talker stood up. 'We'll have to know one another far better first.'

'Come on, Talker,' said Penelope. 'Surely you know you can trust us?'

The bird looked at her with black eyes. 'I've seen what kind of people you are,' she said.

And how do you answer that?

Kame had been carefully cleaning and checking his sword and armour. The sword was in the same superb shape as when he had first

received it, the only part of his equipment issued by his lord. Despite the number of lives it had 165

taken, the armour and bones it had sliced through, the edge was unnotched and perfect.

The rest of his equipment was not in such good condition. Straps were worn, several of the narrow strips of metal making up the breastplate were dented, and the lacquer definitely needed the attention of an expert.

Kame laughed at himself, softly. He had just been thinking how his armour was quite adequate for now, since it was unlikely he would survive the battle to come. But then, were he struck down, Kannon would simply resurrect him – it was a strange mercy, to feel the blade or the shaft bite deep, to feel the overwhelming moment of blackness, and then to find yourself struggling back to life, like a man dragging himself from the pit of despair to fight on.

Kuriisu-san walked over and sat down next to Kame, silently. His strange blue eyes seemed misty, like the sky seen through the haze of distance, almost as though he was meditating. Kame had seen the look before, in the eyes of those who had been defeated in battle. And yet there was no way out for the brave-hearted foreigner, no *seppuku* to escape shame or enemy capture. He had to keep fighting on and fulfil his duty.

'When I was a young man. . . ' the ronin said gruffly.

'Chiyono's dead,' said Kuriisu. 'Did you know her? When you were here?'

'The nun? I remember her, though I never spoke to her.'

Kuriisu fell silent once more. After a while, Kame started over again. 'When I was a young man, I thought that losing my master was the worst thing that could possibly happen. Before I had entered his service, I was living in a chilly hut with eight brothers and sisters, lucky if my belly was filled with millet twice a day. I would have nightmares about my lord being slain in battle, wake up at night grasping blindly for my sword while my wife sleepily asked what the fuss was all about.' He barked a laugh. 'Once it had actually happened, though, it did not seem so terrible.'

Kuriisu-san didn't answer, though Kame could tell from his face that he was listening. 'It's true, I almost decided to follow my master into

death. I lost nearly everything, but I did not lose everything. I kept my life, my health, my honour. And I found useful work, work that required courage and intelligence.

It was a matter of rethinking my views on life, as we all must do from time to time.'

'I'm thinking,' said Kuriisu-san. Kame was taken aback by how pale and calm the young man's voice had become.

'What are you thinking about?'

'I'm thinking about all the worlds that are going to die because he's not there to save them. All the people that are going to die because I'm not him.'

'There is nothing for it,' said Kame firmly. He bowed to Kuriisu. 'You are our leader now, and you will carry on.'

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The young man didn't answer. Kame did not show his worry, but it seemed as though Kuriisu was drifting away, to some far island where their present troubles were nothing but an unpleasant memory.

Someone shouted, nearby.

'What was that?'

said Kuriisu-san, looking

around.

'Flying heads!' cried a novice monk, running up.

'Oh no,' said Chris. He blinked, and suddenly his eyes seemed normal again, alert. Kame relaxed a little. 'Again with the flying heads.'

Penelope's eyes moved from Mr Cwej to the *drone* and back again. 'What are they, precisely?' she said.

Mr Cwej had picked up a heavy piece of firewood. He swung it at one of the Caxtarid's *drones* as it shot past him with a rush of air. The machine stopped and hovered, just high enough to be out of his reach.

'It's kind of hard to explain,' said Mr Cwej. 'Do you have cameras in your era?' He waved the tip of the stick, as though daring the staring

drone to descend on him. ‘The Caxtarid can see through its eyes.’

Penelope glanced over at the pod. The Kapteynians were watching the flock of heads warily. Now and again one of the little machines tried to get a better look at the pod, and a Kapteynian would brandish its laser rifle, frightening the machine away. Penelope wondered if the *drones* were controlled by the Caxtarid, or if they somehow operated of their own volition.

‘Miss Gate,’ said Mr Cwej, ‘tell me something.’

‘What do you want to know?’ she said carefully.

‘Do the Kapteynians have translators? Like Joel’s?’

Penelope thought for a moment. ‘I suppose they must,’ she said. ‘We were able to understand one another perfectly.’

‘Find out,’ he said.

Penelope nodded and marched over to the birds, ducking a low-flying head on the way. The Roshi had ordered the monks inside during the bizarre attack.

Puzzled eyes watched her from nearby doorways.

‘Talker!’ she said. The bird didn’t take her eyes off the meandering *drone* she was watching, her weapon ready in her hands. ‘How is it I can speak your language?’

‘That’s easy,’ she said. ‘You must have a translation device.’

‘You have none of your own?’

‘Wish we did.’

Penelope went back across the courtyard. A flying head circled her lazily.

The component beneath its ‘eyes’ looked alarmingly like a mouth. She found herself tucking her hands under her arms to prevent it biting her fingers.

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At last the metal creature drifted away, and she strode back to Mr Cwej, who was still holding his bizarre confrontation. ‘They do not

have translators,' she told him.

'OK, so how could you understand one another?' Penelope realized the question was rhetorical; Mr Cwej was cogitating aloud. 'Through the TARDIS?

It'd be a first. Should only be the Doctor and me. Something else, then.' He glanced at her, his eyes flicking instantly back to the *drone*. 'You haven't gone and invented a translation machine, have you?'

'No. You're worrying me. It is as though some external instrumentality took it upon itself to facilitate our colloquy.'

Mr Cwej gave her a puzzled glance. The flying head dodged around the back of him, and he spun, ready to lash out at it. It kept its distance. 'So who do we know around here who performs miracles?'

Who did he mean? The Roshi? The Caxtarid? Surely not.

She turned, slowly, to look at the pod.

'If it's got psychokinesis,' said Mr Cwej, 'it might be telepathic as well. And you were the one it reached out to in the first place.'

'When it brought me here,' she said, awed.

'Have you experienced anything else weird? To do with your mind, or anything?'

They turned to look at each other.

'Nightmares,' they said, together.

The *drone* took the opportunity to make its escape.

'You must sleep,' said Penelope. 'You have not slept for days.'

They were sitting on the floor of the empty meditation hall. Mr Cwej had been discussing defences and food with Kame and the Roshi for an hour. Now she had brought him her concern, and a bowl of rice.

He turned his cloudy eyes to her. 'I can't sleep,' he said. 'The Room is waiting for me.'

'I know.' He looked at her in surprise. She touched his arm, lightly. 'But if you would lead us, you must eat, and sleep, or you will be in no fit condition to do so.'

He closed his eyes. ‘It’s waiting for me,’ he said again. ‘It’s all because of death, you see. The Doctor died because I wasn’t there.’

‘You cannot blame yourself. You must not! It was a terrible accident.’

‘That’s only half of it. I couldn’t kill Liz when she needed me to.’

Penelope didn’t know what to make of that. Mr Cwej opened his eyes. She was sure her face had drained of colour. ‘We were poisoned,’ he said dully.

‘She insisted I take half the antidote, and carry the rest to safety so that more could be made from the sample. Then she asked me to kill her.’

‘To spare her the pain of the poison?’ He nodded. ‘And you could not. Who could face such a horror?’

He shrugged his shoulders. ‘But you’re right,’ he said. ‘I have to put it aside, don’t I? I have to sleep. Even though it’ll be the Room.’ He looked at her with his dulled eyes. ‘She hated me because I couldn’t kill her. And then Imorkal did it anyway.’

Penelope thought for a moment. ‘What would you say to her if she had lived? If I were her?’

His eyes held hers. ‘Thanks. And sorry.’

‘All right,’ said Penelope. She got up.

He touched her hand. ‘Will you wake me up?’ he said desperately. ‘After four hours? No matter what?’

‘I promise.’

So Chris Cwej put everything aside. He put the pod and the siege aside. He put Roz aside. He put Liz aside. He put the Doctor aside. The living needed him, and he had to be ready to help them.

He ate his rice, and went to sleep. And only slept.

When Penelope came back four hours later, he was curled on a mat in the hall. He looked almost as though he had fallen over, a map still loosely held in one hand. Penelope watched his slow breathing for a few moments, saw the tension gone out of his face, his hands.

It was remarkable that he was bearing up so well under the stress. The resilience of youth, or long years' experience at the Doctor's side? She suppressed an urge to stroke his hair, and instead checked her pocket watch. Five more minutes.

She wished, now, that she and the Doctor had not parted on such disagree-able terms. Even though she had been able to offer him some comfort before his death, and they had been reconciled, it seemed so futile to have wasted their time bickering.

At least she now knew the reason for the Doctor's insistent interest in her nightmares. What was the meaning of their shared dream – herself, the Doctor, Mr Cwej? Why this common nightmare of enclosure, like a dream of being trapped in a coffin, buried alive? It was time. She bent to shake the young man awake. Chris's eyes flickered open. He looked up at her. 'I've been conned,' he said.

169

Falling upwards

No luck. I fall back. Too much weight resting on me for me to shift it. I can't even gasp for breath. Body calling up every last scrap of stored oxygen, enough to last me for a few more minutes at least, as long as I keep brain and body running on minimum. As long as I don't make any more desperate lunges to get out.

Now would be a good time to go mad. If only I could figure out quite how to manage it. Just a short hop sideways from reality, they say, but I can't seem to move in that direction either. Brain's running so slowly now.

It would be such a relief if I finally did go insane, because then I'd no longer have to stay on constant guard against going mad. That weight would be off me. I'd be relieved of duty. Wouldn't have to keep trying to keep control, make sure everyone plays the parts they're supposed to in the plans I lay.

But it's that control which the others want to lock safely away, because they're afraid it's another step down that road to megalomania. And it's that same manipulation, that same prodding of people into position, which made me lead Chris into burying me alive.

The irony is killing me.

I'm not sure which is worse. In the Room there's no hope, no exit, no

slim chance of a way out. Right now, in this dark, there's just enough hope that it sends you into an absolute panic at the thought of not being able to grasp it.

The last of the stored oxygen's going sour.

What will it be like after it happens? A trial before a jury of my twelve peers? Six consecutive life sentences for crimes against my conscience?

They think I deserve this.

They?

We.

Let's not mince pronouns here: they're as much me as I am. I'm all in this together. I stand with all the other facets of me as they pass judgement on my life. *We* decided I'd gone too far.

We think I deserve this.

We?

I.

It's all too easy to take the metaphors literally. But we're not separate: we're a chain of cause and effect.

I think I deserve this.

No.

Of course I think I deserve this. To be devoured, sacrificed, *punished* because I couldn't save everyone, or because I let horrible things happen to those who deserved it. Of course I let horrible things happen to me. I thought I deserved it. But I don't.

And I don't have to put myself through this if I –

I moved.

Just a little, a slight twist of the hand, dirt trickling through my fingers.

Just a tiny bit scraped off the mass above me. Again. My hand pushing side to side, pushing the soil away around it, letting it fall beneath me. Other hand can do it too. Can't push the earth up, but I can let it fall past me. Try moving my whole body the same way. There. It's scraping against me. I can hear the dirt rasping against my ears. Flush it out of the way.

Everything that's holding me down, let it fall away.

I can still feel my body beginning to die all around me. Oxygen-starved cells beginning to stumble and choke. Perhaps it's time – time to wipe the slate, forget what I am, stop being paralysed by the fear and guilt.

No. I don't have to die to be free of this. I've already changed so much in this lifetime, I can let go of my past without letting go of who I am. I release myself from the burden of hating myself for things long since done. I free myself from the task of being perfect and handling everything. No more prisoners. No more self-accusation, self-flagellation, self-castigation. I don't deserve it. None of me does.

Not even the person I used to be. No need to lock him away, no need for any of me to blame myself. I keep thinking as though I killed him, but I didn't.

I'm not dead.

Less weight on me now, the soil more loosely packed. Getting close. Lungs like hot coals. Don't rush. Don't push. Pushing only makes it harder, drains your strength more. Don't try to control. Relax and let the movement move you. Simple unconscious rhythm of your hands and body will free you. Like breathing. Very like breathing.

Muscles sizzling.

The change could start any moment now.

Not sure

whether this cat will be alive or dead when the box opens. Don't know if I'll have a new face when I break free.

Don't need to worry about it either. If it happens then it happens, but if it does I won't be trapped: I will go on. I will be the one who's still alive, 172

because I'm not just who I am right now: I'm who I was and who I will be too.

I am the Doctor. I am the Doctor.

I

AM

. . . touching air.

Fingers free, scrabbling for a grip above. Left hand breaks through too.

Don't breathe, don't breathe, there's still a foot of soil over your face, whole body tightening with a final breathless convulsion, funny how it's so much more agonizing when you're this *close*, not sure whether your body is going to give out just before the finish line or rally for that final PULL

free.

Weight falling away from my face. I breathe. Head turns. I can *move*. I cough, spluttering out the chunks of dirt I've just inhaled, sucking in another lungful of air.

Out. I am. Free. We're all free.

I pull the rest of me loose and start to stand up, getting as far clear of the ground as I can just because I can. Stumbling to my feet, feeling all this precious wind on my face. My gasps sounding like laughter.

Through streaming eyes I somehow see Death, reclining against a tree stump, watching with a smirk.

'There now,' she says, 'that wasn't so bad, was it?'

173

19

Needlessly Messianic

Joel Andrew Mintz had never killed anyone before.

Te Yene Rana, on the other hand, had stopped counting at one hundred.

She had pulled the small, pale human out from under a corpse, and slapped him around until he'd stopped screaming. When he'd got a good look at her, snatching up his eye magnifiers from the soil and jamming them on to his face, he'd started screaming again.

Now he was sitting at an odd angle on the ridge, surrounded by bodies, his eyes large and blank behind those little circles of glass. She'd only picked him up because she wanted a look at him.

'You're from the future? Right?' she said, poking him with the barrel of her laser rifle.

'Uh, yes, yeah,' he said. 'I've never killed anybody before. Did I tell you that?'

'I think you mentioned it. Thanks.'

This ridge had been the centre of the battle camp. She could see small groups of fighters moving around nearby, picking up corpses, carrying away the wounded. All very routine.

'Where's the leader?' she demanded.

He looked around, but he wasn't taking anything in. 'I couldn't help it,' he said. 'It couldn't be helped. I don't know. Is he still alive?'

She picked him up by his collar. He struggled a bit. 'Is he one of these cadavers?' she demanded.

'I don't think so,' he managed, at length. 'He must be somewhere else.'

She dropped him. 'Right,' she said. 'He's probably off organizing whatever's left of his troops. Will he come back here?'

'I don't know,' said the human. 'I guess so.'

'Then I'll wait.' She picked up an overturned stool, and sat down on it, crossing her legs. 'Great view from here. Maybe I'll spot him.'

'What do you want?' said the human, dully.

'To change sides, of course. Umemi-sama's head got blown off during the battle, so it's no damned use working for him any more. I've got a bunch of information about what's left of his forces. Not that there's much to tell!

Anyway, I'll bet this daimyo's going to head for the monastery as soon as he's got his act together. And that's where I want to go.'

She looked out across the valley, towards the monastery, sitting on its distant rock. 'That's what I want,' she repeated. 'The pod, some Kapteynian vol-au-vents, the Doctor and a vegetable peeler.'

She grinned down at Joel, who shivered uncontrollably. 'Doesn't take much to keep me happy.'

On a tree stump, somewhere – in the forest, the Doctor sat, listening to a nearby stream.

He could see the water through the trees, a little way away down a gentle slope. It caught the moonlight in tiny sparkling flashes.

The water sounded like music, like a million miniature bells. The sound echoed softly from the trees, mixing with the low breathing of the wind in the leaves.

It was so calming. So quiet and random, so soft and natural. It soothed his mind, soothed away the panic and the worry. He could feel all of that built-up fear drifting away on the water, years and years of it, bubbling softly downstream.

The little girl he was holding couldn't hear it, of course.

She was so small and light it was as though he had an arm full of nothing, but he was holding her tightly, as tightly as though the lethal arrow still connected them.

'Death defies the Doctor,' he murmured, and even the words went floating downstream.

It took Chris far longer to find the grave than he would have liked. He wished he hadn't hidden it quite so well.

He crept through the forest. It was so quiet. Even the birds had been scared silent, waiting to see what would happen next.

At first he had wondered why the monastery hadn't been attacked yet, but his first look at the battlefield had given him a good idea. The two armies had annihilated each other. Part of him was glad. They wouldn't be terrorizing any more peasants. On the other hand, if Umemi and Gufuu were helpless now – some other daimyo would just move in and take over.

He couldn't assume it was all over. Not yet. There might be reinforcements on the way, or even one of those other daimyo. And Goddess knew what Joel 176

might be up to. They needed to open the pod, and for that they needed the Doctor.

Chris was looking so hard for the oddly shaped rock that he almost ran into a pair of Gufuu's samurai. He slipped behind a huge pine. They'd found the body of one of the enemy warriors. As he watched, one of them loosened and yanked off the man's helmet, while the other pulled his dagger out and started *slicing*.

Chris thought about throwing up, but he was too furious with the Doctor.

He turned, putting his back to the rough bark. And saw the rock.

He crept away as the samurai concentrated on their grisly work. They'd present the head and claim the kill, though the poor bastard had probably been skewered by one of the arrows that had randomly hailed down through the trees. Here and there, shafts still stuck out of the soil or tree trunks.

Chris followed his trail. The rock, the marked pine. . .

The empty grave.

The freshly dug soil was scattered again, the leaves and twigs shoved to the side. Had someone dug up the Doctor's body, dirk in hand, ready to slice away his head and claim the kill?

No. The dirt had been pushed away from beneath.

He made himself look closer, making certain. The body of the little girl was gone as well. Had the samurai dug her up and taken her away? No. She wouldn't earn them any reward from an admiring daimyo.

Chris turned from the grave, stared out into the silent forest. Somewhere out there the Doctor was walking with a cold child in his arms and dirt in his hair.

Suddenly he was a lot less angry.

Penelope had finished emptying the Doctor's pockets. It had taken

more than an hour. How did they make garments in the future, that they could hold such quantities of material?

Night had fallen, and the early spring air was chilly. Even Talker had sent most of her little group indoors, remaining by the pod to watch over it herself.

The stars burnt in the blackness overhead, astonishingly bright.

Penelope sat on a veranda, arranging the objects she had discovered. She could not identify many of them. It was as though, in these handfuls of knick-knacks and junk, she had the unimaginable future spread out before her.

Mr Cwej's precipitate departure had saddened her more than almost anything since the beginning of this sorry adventure. His conviction that the Doctor must still be alive was so *intense*. The lively grin with which he had announced his intentions to return to the crude grave!

She had not had the heart to say a word against his plan. Worse, the Roshi had not tried to stop him either. Perhaps the holy man knew mere words would not be enough to dissuade the young man from his fantasy.

And what, Penelope Sarah Gate, will become of you?

Mr Cwej could not pilot the Doctor's time ship, as he had explained to her; with the Doctor gone, they were trapped here. The Roshi was preparing for a siege, his monks checking their narrow stocks of food. Perhaps she would be trapped here while the pod's sad story played itself out. Eventually the samurai would overrun them, and she would be slain, or worse, along with all the others caught up in this situation.

If only they knew what the pod was. The thought of the link Mr Cwej supposed she shared with it chilled her. She looked over to where Talker sat on top of the thing, as though it was a replacement for her cold and forgotten egg, buried somewhere in a distant wood.

Penelope shivered. Was the pod watching her, through some sense she could not imagine, an icy and alien mind observing her every thought and action?

They had pleaded with Talker at length, but she would not give up the

object's secret. Penelope had wondered if the Kapteynian even knew what the pod was. But surely she and her comrades would not have battled so hard to reach the object if it was not of supreme importance to them.

They ought to lift up the pod, carry it outside the walls of the monastery, and leave it to be taken by the first person who wanted it.

Of course, convincing Talker of the wisdom of this sensible course of action might prove difficult. If not actually fatal.

There was a flurry of motion near one of the monastery's walls. Penelope looked up. To her astonishment, Mr Cwej was striding across the courtyard.

'You can close your mouth now,' he joked, as he walked up to her.

'I confess I did not expect to see you again.'

'I couldn't find the Doctor,' he said. He crouched down, and started rummaging through the collection of objects she had accumulated. 'I was right.

He was still alive. He'd even dug his way out of the grave.'

Penelope's hands went to her mouth. 'Mr Cwej!' she gasped. 'That is a horrible thing to say!'

He glanced up at her. 'He pretended to die. Probably to force me to take charge of this whole mess.' He looked more amused than angry. 'I might kill him myself, when I find him. Anyway, he's gone off somewhere, so we're back to square one – having to cope with this by ourselves.'

He was positively jaunty. It was such a change from his earlier frightening calm and, before that, his melancholy. 'What do you have in mind?' she asked carefully.

He had found the item he wanted, a flat square of coloured metal. He held it up between thumb and forefinger.

'How much does Talker trust you?'

'A little,' said Penelope.

‘I think it’s time we let Schrödinger’s Cat out of the box.’

Talker was letting herself doze. These primitives couldn’t do anything to the pod. Even less than she could do to it, without Technician, without equipment, without even this Doctor everybody kept going on about.

She didn’t know what she was going to do. It wasn’t fair to have involved all of these aliens in the struggle with the Caxtarid. Eventually the slaver was going to become bored with chasing them around, and then she would call for reinforcements, and that would be the end of the matter.

She clucked, agitatedly. The whole population of this backward, wet world might be in danger, if the Caxtarids took a shine to them. The humans had few technical skills, but they might still make useful slaves. Or tasty meals.

We should never have come here. Should never have made our escape. But what choice did we have?

Over and over she saw those frantic hours aboard the Caxtarid vessel. A great, long, metal ship, shaped like a needle, stabbing through hyperspace.

There had been sixty of her species aboard, slaves fresh from Kapteyn 5, still astonished and angry and even panicked by their new condition. Forty had died in the escape attempt.

Foolish Caxtarids, to have left together so many Technicians, so many Warriors. . . but the leader of the rebellion was a mere Gardener, with reasons of her own.

She had planned everything so carefully, knowing that once the Caxtarids realized what was happening, no plan would be enough to resist their anger.

All the guards the rebels had posted, all the equipment they had hoarded, all of it meant nothing in the end.

The rebellion had started when the chimes for third shift had echoed through the vessel. Sudden and silent, the Warriors pulling on their purloined armour and grasping their stolen weapons. The Technicians silently forcing new instructions into the ship’s systems. The Gardeners rising from their work in the hydroponics area with cold black eyes. All with their instructions mem-orized, plans of the ship,

weak points in the Caxtarids' defences, the timetable of actions to be taken, everything.

And in the end it had been a desperate, running battle, as their plans were crushed by the Caxtarids' superior numbers and weapons and cruelty, and they'd been running for their lives to the escape pods, cut off from the small 179

fighter ships, cut off from one another, the narrow corridors crammed with the bodies of slaves and slavers.

It was nothing to be proud of. Nothing. Talker clucked again, wishing she had an egg to sit on, wishing she had a hill to pluck the weeds from on a warm afternoon. This was not what she had wanted to do with her life.

She brushed a wing over the cool metal surface of the pod. 'I can't even do anything for you,' she murmured.

The human, Misht Jate, was walking up. Talker opened her eyes, cocking her head to watch the alien.

'Hello, Talker,' she said. 'How are you?'

'I know what you're thinking,' Talker said. 'We can't. . . do anything about the pod, so we might as well hand it over to our enemies. It won't be of any use to them, so what damage will be done?'

'I don't think we can ask you to do that,' said the human. 'And it would be your decision, Talker.'

'True,' she squawked. 'I'm the one with the gun.'

'So I suggest you run,' said Penelope.

She slapped her hand, palm first, on to the pod.

Talker looked down to the metallic object stuck to the pod. She looked back up at the human. She decided not to shoot her She leapt straight into the air and flew as far and as fast upwards as she could.

Penelope was almost knocked over by the force of Talker's explosive flight.

She leant back, watching the bird shooting up into the air like a cannon ball.

A moment later, she felt a gigantic, invisible force grab her, harder than the insane tuggings of the fourth dimension.

‘Chris!’ she screamed, as the force dragged her to her knees.

He was there in an instant, hovering, not sure of whether to touch her.

‘Does it hurt? What’s it doing?’ he demanded.

But she couldn’t speak. The thing dragged her bodily across the ground, knees scraping in the dust. Her hands flung themselves out towards the metal.

‘Is it trying to communicate?’ Mr Cwej was shouting. ‘Can you hear anything in your mind?’

Penelope’s hands were wrenched forward and slapped hard on to the metal of the pod, fingers spread. She felt the coldness of the metal, its smoothness, and then she felt a rushing power of such intensity that she thought her skull would shatter and her heart would explode and she realized that she was nowhere near ready to die yet.

Gufuu-sama ignored the pulsing pain of his wounds, coolly walking the length and breadth of his camp, taking stock of his situation.

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His army and that of Umemi-san had been far too evenly matched. Similar numbers, similar arms. All these years, neither of them had been able to gain the upper hand, and this battle had been no different.

He stepped inside his war camp. It was a wide, grassy area, shielded from the wind by curtains strung tautly between poles, each curtain bearing his butterfly mark. Some of the wounded had been evacuated to nearby houses and a temple at the end of the valley, but few places in this contested territory were safe. He had ordered the rest brought here.

His doctors drifted from body to body, some of the injured warriors writhing, some still. None of them could be used in further fighting; anyone who was still capable of combat was outside, guarding the camp.

The foreign boy, Mintsu, was helping one of the doctors as he washed the wounds of a badly hurt samurai. The lad looked nauseated by the

work. He had intelligence and useful knowledge, but little spirit. Still, he had managed to slay an attacker. Gufuu-sama had witnessed it himself What courage the thick of battle could inspire!

Seeing him, the lad ran up, and bowed deeply. The glass frames he wore on his face fell off, and he snatched them up. Gufuu restrained a smile.

‘ *O-daimyo*,’ said the boy, ‘what happens now? Why haven’t we gone back to your castle?’

Gufuu-sama decided to forgive the lad his rough manners, given his barbarian origins and the shock of his first battle. ‘Once our reinforcements arrive,’

he said, ‘we’ll attack the monastery. I’ve sent a messenger demanding they hand over the pod, but Kadoguchi-roshi is a stubborn old priest – I doubt he’ll capitulate. He sheltered one of my concubines after she ran away, and I couldn’t even buy her back from him.’

The boy looked as though he was going to cry. Gufuu-sama sighed internally. The lad was going to need toughening up if he was going to serve. He was gazing at something behind Gufuu-sama’s shoulder. . .

A moment later, there came a cry of surprise. Gufuu whirled, his sword half drawn.

It was the Doctor.

‘Oh my God,’ said Joel, faintly. Gufuu just stared.

The man was filthy, covered in fresh soil. His eyes blazed in his dirt-streaked face. He looked like a demon, something that had fought its way free from hell and was here to curse them all.

In his arms, he held the corpse of a young peasant girl. Her rough clothes were soaked with blood.

‘See what you’ve done,’ he breathed, then he swayed and fell forward, on to his knees.

181

Unturtled

Out

Out

OUT

Oh God! All the gods! GET ME OUT OF HERE!

Don't you understand? I've been in here so long! No no, not just the last month, but for years! YEARS!

Don't you understand? They put me in here because of my brain! Because of the way my brain works! When they found out I could move things with my mind, they put me in here! 'Nothing more dangerous than a slave with a weapon,' they said, even though I could barely lift a coin with my mind, a speck of dust with my mind. They put me in here WHERE IT'S COLD!

Ican'tmovel'mlockedinherelcan'tgetoutlcan'tspeak
ALLICANDOISTHINK!

THINK! And everything's so jumbled, none of it makes any sense. I can't get anything to work! Don't you understand? This thing is supercooled! A life-support capsule! It ought to be dark in here, it ought to be silent in here, I ought to be asleep in here, but instead MY BRAIN IS WORKING FOUR

THOUSAND TIMES FASTER THAN IT OUGHT TO!

I don't care who you are or what you are! JUST GET ME OUT!

I keep reaching out to you, and you don't understand! I keep trying to protect myself, and you still couldn't work it out! GET ME OUT FOR GOD'S

SAKE!

YES I'm a Kapteynian! Of course I'm a Kapteynian! Nothing more dangerous than a slave with a weapon! Nothing more dangerous than a slave who IS

A WEAPON! Don't you understand? The daimyo can't open the pod – they'll try to use me as a weapon! The Caxtarid won't open the pod – she'll want to use this strange new supercooled psychokinetic weapon! GET me OUT!

I don't care if you don't know how! I don't know how! If I knew how I WOULD HAVE RELEASED MYSELF! You've got to listen to me! You've

got to do something! It was their law, you see, any slave with psychic abilities had to be segregated, had to be safely stowed for the voyage, had to be locked away. You can't leave me in here! Every minute is like a month! It's like being 183

locked in a prison cell forever, a slave cell, with no way to open the doors from the inside, no doors at all! If you let me out, I'll be back to normal, harmless, helpless. I won't bother anyone, I promise. All of this mess fuss will be over, I promise! I won't be any more trouble!

Out!

OUT!

GET ME OUT OF HERE!

184

20

Half a cat is better than none

One of Gufuu's doctors had prised the dead child from the Doctor's arms and taken the poor creature's body away. Another doctor was sitting beside the strange foreigner, trying to clean some of the dirt from his face and clothes so that he could examine the man's wounds.

The foreigner pushed his hand away. 'Go and attend to someone who needs you,' he grumbled. The physician glanced up at Gufuu, who nodded. The man bowed, gathered his dignity, and walked away.

'How did you enter my camp?' Gufuu demanded. 'Didn't my guards try to stop you?'

'They were distracted,' said the Doctor. 'So sorry. What's your plan, Gufuu-sama? Has there been sufficient slaughter, or do you still have your heart set on possessing the pod?'

'I am an inch from victory,' said Gufuu mildly. 'Umemi lies slain, his army destroyed. And the monastery has no warrior monks. The pod will shortly be in my grasp, as it rightfully should be.'

'You've got what you truly wanted,' said the Doctor. His forthrightness was still admirable, as infuriating as it was! 'Umemi's power is shattered. You can easily take over his estates. Why bother with the pod? It's of no use to you.'

‘Doctor,’ said Gufuu, ‘before, you were concerned that war might break out over ownership of the pod. Now that it’s too late to worry about that, why are you still encouraging me to avoid the object?’

‘Because the superior warrior knows when not to fight, as well as when to fight,’ said the Doctor. ‘And now is not the time to fight. You need risk nothing.

Talk to the monks. Find out what the pod truly is – I’ll help you.’

They were wise words, it was true. But what motive was the Doctor hiding?

‘Why ought I to take your advice?’

‘Because I came back from the dead to talk to you,’ said the Doctor, brushing soil from his sleeve.’

‘How’d you like to go back where you came from?’

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The Doctor looked up. ‘Oh no, not you again.’

The demon woman, Te Yene Rana, was leaning over the cloth wall, grinning. ‘I’m pleased to see you again.’ She ducked under the curtain and came into the enclosure. ‘Are you going to answer his question?’

Gufuu looked between them, mildly. The Doctor said, ‘She knows what the pod is. She owned it once, and now she wants it back again. That’s why she joined forces with Umemi-sama –’

‘– who’s now extremely dead,’ she said. ‘And so I’ve offered my services to the winning side.’

‘And what have you told the daimyo his prize actually is?’

‘It’s a weapon, of course,’ said Te Yene Rana. ‘Or will be, with adjustments and experimentation.’

The Doctor looked at Gufuu. ‘ *O-daimyo*,’ he said, ‘she has no intention of allowing you to use the “weapon” – she only wants your help in recovering it for herself, and in taking revenge on her enemies.’

Gufuu-sama smiled. ‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘I want her help in recovering it for myself, and in taking revenge on *my* enemies.’

With a movement as simple as a flick of the wrist, he slid *his katana* from its sheath and slipped it through the Caxtarid's neck. Her head bounced, once, its expression of surprise almost comical.

The Doctor looked up at him. Something flickered over his face, but he wisely kept his thoughts to himself.

Gufuu-sama carefully wiped the blood from his sword and replaced it in its sheath. He bent to pick up the alien's weapon. 'Some allies are far too dangerous to keep,' he commented. 'Mintsu, come here.'

Joel detached himself from a wounded samurai and scurried over. He made a quick, inelegant bow, not sure where to put his eyes.

'Do you know how to operate this weapon?' said Gufuu. He held out the laser rifle.

The Doctor stared at Joel, who swallowed hard, taking the gun from his new leader. 'Um,' he said. 'No. I mean, maybe. I need to take a look at it.'

Then do so,' said Gufuu-sama. 'Isha-san, will you remain here as our guest?'

'Of course,' said the Doctor. 'I didn't come all this way just to leave again.'

'Good,' said Gufuu, 'because I am about to send a page to the monastery, with the suggestion that we make an equitable exchange.'

Talker was furious.

'Pluck me! I can't believe you did that!' she squawked, stalking the courtyard in a rage. 'I still can't believe you did that!'

Chris looked helplessly at Dengon. The young monk said, 'Please, Niwatori-san. There are people trying to sleep, including your own comrades.'

Talker folded her legs under her and bristled. 'My heart nearly jumped out through my beak,' she grumbled. 'I could have shot her, you know. It's just that I'm a gardener. I don't have any reflexes except when it comes to aphids.

So just count yourselves lucky.'

Chris turned his back on the griping bird and knelt down again beside Penelope. The young woman was still leaning against the pod, on her knees, her arms flung over its metal surface. The moon was high now, so she was a dull silhouette against the silver, her glasses highlights in her empty face.

'Penelope?' Chris said again. 'Can you hear me?'

There was still no response. He had been trying for quarter of an hour, but she had just clung to the side of the machine, shivering.

Goddess, what had he done?

'Dengon,' he said, 'could you find out if there's any sign of movement from the samurai?'

' *Hei*, Kuriisu-san.' He moved off into the blackness.

'I would have advised you against it,' said Talker, 'had you asked me.'

'Shut up, Talker!' he snapped. He put a hand to his head.

'Sorry. Listen, it's done, all right? If you can't tell me something that will help Penelope, then please just be quiet while I try to think of what to do.'

Talker pecked the ground.

Chris turned back to Penelope, and risked

stroking her hair. 'What's it done to her?' he whispered.

'He doesn't want to let her go,' said Talker.

Chris looked at the bird. Talker said, 'He's scared. Trapped in there. She's the first contact he's had with the outside since he was sealed in. He doesn't want to let her go. Probably.' She pecked at the ground, agitatedly. 'I'm trying to imagine what's going through his head.'

'He? Who is he?' Chris looked down at the pod. 'There's someone inside it,'

he breathed. 'Isn't there? Is it a Kapteynian?'

'Yeah,' said Talker. 'It was because of him that we had to escape. Technician was supposed to let him out, once we were safe.'

‘What is it, exactly?’ said Chris.

‘It’s a cryogenic capsule,’ said Talker. ‘They didn’t find out about him until we were in flight, so it was the only way they could safely store him.’

‘What’s his name?’

Talker stood up and crouched beside Penelope, on the other side. ‘Psychokinetic!’ she shouted into Penelope’s ear. ‘Stop it!’

Penelope’s body twitched.

‘Can we have our human back now, please?’ said Talker, even more loudly.

Chris shouted, ‘If you want us to help you, you have to let her go!’

‘Let her go!’ insisted Talker.

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Penelope snatched her hands away from the machine, breathing frantically, looking around the darkness in confusion. Chris took her arms, gently. ‘It’s all right,’ he said. ‘I’ve got you. Relax.’

‘Dear God,’ she gulped, as though she’d almost forgotten how to breathe, how to speak. ‘Oh God! We have to open that device immediately! Every minute is another day in hell for him – we cannot let it go on!’

Chris took her hands. ‘Miss Gate,’ he said. ‘Tell us what the matter is.’

‘I don’t know if I understand what he told me. Not fully.’ Her breathing was slowing as she calmed down. ‘He says his brain is supercooled. That the galvanic messages that are his thoughts are travelling too rapidly.’

Talker said, ‘That could explain a lot. Psychokinetic could hardly lift a rock.

That’s why we weren’t expecting the Caxtarids to realize he had psychic powers. It’s illegal, for slaves. They kill you or do experiments on you. Or sell you back for more slaves without the brain power!’

‘All he cares about is getting out of that thing,’ breathed Chris. ‘That’s what this has all been about. Penelope, does he know any way out?’

She shook her head. ‘No, or he’d already have used it. He’s trapped.’

‘That’s an industrial life-support pod,’ said Talker. ‘Meant for animals. It’s down near absolute zero in there. If we try to open the pod and we muck it up, we’ll either kill ourselves, or we’ll kill him.’

Chris reached down and pulled the Yakko Warner fridge magnet off the pod.

‘He might have been better off if we had blown him up,’ he said.

Someone shouted. They looked up.

For a moment, time was frozen, as the single arrow arced over the monastery wall. Everyone stopped what they were doing, pausing for the three seconds it took the shaft to curve, peak, fall, and finally embed itself in the wooden wall of the main hall.

Chris ran to the arrow. There was a scroll wrapped around it. He opened it, glanced at the Japanese writing, waved it about in exasperation, and handed it to Dengon.

The monk quickly scanned the lines, and looked up at Chris in astonishment. ‘Isha-sama is alive,’ he said.

‘Do you know how to use that?’ asked the Doctor.

Joel jumped so violently that he almost dropped the laser rifle. He was sitting cross-legged on the ground with the heavy weapon in his lap, fiddling with the safety catch.

He adjusted his glasses. ‘I can probably work it out,’ he said. ‘It’s a pretty basic design.’

‘It ought to come in very handy for Gufuu’s assault on the monastery,’ commented the Doctor. A page had brought him a helmet full of water from the 188

stream, and he was cleaning himself up as best he could, using a now very muddy Paisley scarf.

‘I can’t give him a futuristic weapon,’ said Joel dully. In his bewildered eyes the Doctor could see the young man he’d met in Little Caldwell, thirteen years of Joel’s life ago. ‘It seemed like such a good idea at the time, you know?’

‘What are you going to do now?’

‘Why didn’t you stop me?’ said Joel. ‘You knew all along. You even wrote something in my diary. Why didn’t you stop me?’

‘Because I want *you* to stop you,’ said the Doctor mildly. He looked at his raw silk shirt, grimacing at the stain and tear that had ruined one shoulder.

‘But you let it go on too long,’ said Joel. ‘I’m in too deep now. I can’t turn back.’

‘Of course you can,’ said the Doctor. ‘I wonder what became of my hat.’

‘I can’t.’ Joel shook his head.

‘You’re getting more last chances than most.’ The Doctor folded his arms.

‘How did this all begin, Joel? When did the idea of disappearing into history and staking out your own little patch first begin?’

‘A long time ago,’ said Joel.

‘I remember. . .

one night I was reading

alt.alien.visitors, and I suddenly realized that all I could do was read. I couldn’t post something to the Internet about what I’d experienced, all the aliens I’d met, all the adventures and stuff I’d had. Nobody could know. Nobody would ever know.’

‘And that wasn’t enough for you?’

‘I guess not,’ said Joel. ‘Obviously everybody in Little Caldwell knew, and some of our contacts. But the rest of the human race. . . you know when I really decided to go through with it? When I read some stupid article in the newspaper about a *Star Trek* convention in Liverpool. The usual crap about how fans were desperate losers. And I thought, if it wasn’t for *Trek* and *Professor X* and all the SF I’ve read, I couldn’t do this job. Every new weird thing would boggle my mind. I’ve helped save the human race, and they call me a nerd.’

He dug at the ground with the rifle’s muzzle. ‘And now I feel like a real nerd for screwing up. I just wanted to do something small, something good.’ The Doctor just shook his head. ‘It’s not fair.

Someone ought to know.'

'I knew,' said the Doctor. 'I was very impressed with your handling of the Gaffney Incident. Benny told me about it the last time I saw her.'

Joel looked astonished. 'Thanks,' he said.

'You're right. Between your imagination, your attention to detail, and your experience, you're ideally suited to the job – dealing with aliens and faraway people quietly and peacefully, making sure they get home instead of being 189

dissected. You are, however, poorly suited to the position of Manipulator of the Time Lines.'

'You're a semi-mythical figure,' said Joel. 'Don't give me vocational guidance counselling – it's weird.'

'It's hard to be semi-mythical when there's dirt in your socks,' said the Doctor, tugging off a shoe. 'Well, Mr Mintz, what are you going to do now?'

'Doctor. . . I can't go back. I killed someone.' It was a whisper.

'So that's your excuse, is it?'

'Excuse?' said Joel. 'Didn't you hear me, I *killed* someone!'

'If I used that as an excuse,' said the Doctor, 'I'd never get anything done.

Who did you kill, and why?'

'A samurai. He was going to cut me in half.'

'So it was self-defence?'

'Of course it was.' Joel was avoiding the Doctor's stare, fiddling with the controls on the rifle. 'If I hadn't killed him, I would have died. I'm not about to go around murdering people.'

'That's the next step,' said the Time Lord quietly.

Joel looked at him, feeling suddenly tiny and pitiful. 'Help,' he said.

'I can't help you,' said the Doctor. 'Like Chris, you're going to have to be a hero under your own steam. Me, I'm puffed.'

After several cups of tea, Penelope was in much better shape. She felt as though her mind had decided that enough was enough, just at the moment, and she would take a little holiday from all of the activity buzzing around her.

At the moment this largely comprised Mr Cwej, wandering up and down the veranda of the main hall with a manic grin on his face, and Talker, perched on the roof, looking over the edge at him.

'We know he's alive,' Mr Cwej was saying, once again. 'That's a beginning.

That's a great beginning.'

'But where does it lead?' squawked Talker. 'You can't hand the pod over to them. We must free Psychokinetic.' She lowered her voice. 'I am afraid he will go mad. Begin to attack people, destroy things.'

Mr Cwej dug his thumb into his forehead. 'Think! What do we have that they don't!'

'Monks. Vegetables. The pod,' said Talker. 'Maybe we can get Psychokinetic to make himself useful.'

'So far his powers have only worked over a small distance,' Mr Cwej pointed out. 'We'd have to bring them here first. We need to act now.'

'My time conveyance,' said Penelope.

Mr Cwej and Talker both looked at her.

'There might be enough energy left in the egg for another two hops,' she said. 'If I can approximate the coordinates well enough, we could bring the Doctor here.'

'That's brilliant!' Mr Cwej's grin became even wider. 'Where is it?'

'I believe the monks have stored it in one of the buildings.' Penelope climbed wearily to her feet. So much for her mental holiday. 'Have them bring it out, and I'll get my telescope and equipment from the cart.'

Dawn.

The Doctor was watching the sun come up, hands clasped behind his

back, peering over the top of the cloth fence.

They had reluctantly allowed him to help attend the wounded.

They

seemed to fall into two categories. Some had vicious but not life-threatening wounds. Some were beyond the help even of the doctors and all their exper-tise in treating war wounds.

He found the young samurai he'd surrendered to a few days ago. An arrow through the eye, almost instant death. Perhaps he would have admired his opponent's aim. No one knew what had become of his father, whether he was dead, or recovering from wounds at a nearby house, or attending to his duty without regard to his grief.

The Doctor had been listening to the sound of hoofbeats for a little while, echoing through the valleys. Now they were quite close. Gufuu-sama's reinforcements, wasting no time.

It wasn't long before his view of the rising sun was obscured by horses and men, peering down into the enclosure. Captains shouted orders to their men as the new troops spread themselves across the plain, ready for the daimyo's inspection.

The Doctor stood on tiptoe, trying to see over the top of the fence. He didn't want to risk leaving the enclosure in case it earned him an arrow in the back.

They'd taken away the Caxtarid's body and burnt it with the enemy corpses.

One thing fewer he had to worry about, he thought grimly. He wished for the hundredth time that there was some way of knowing how they were faring up at the monastery. How Chris was faring.

Gufuu stepped into the enclosure, accompanied by two fresh samurai, ready for battle. The Doctor nudged Joel with his foot, and the young man jumped to his feet as though he'd sat on a rattlesnake.

One of the samurai marched up to the Doctor, grabbed him roughly, and started winding a rope around him. The Doctor didn't try to resist as his hands were bound tightly behind his back and the warrior forced him to his knees.

‘I take it the monks refused,’ he said. Joel was watching the scene in familiar horror.

‘I haven’t received a reply from them,’ said Gufuu-sama. ‘But now that I have my reinforcements, I no longer need you as a hostage.’ He looked at Joel. ‘Kill him.’

‘What?’

‘Kill him.’

‘But why? What’s the –’

Gufuu-sama stepped up to Joel and slapped him across the face, hard enough to send the time traveller stumbling back. ‘I put up with your ill manners and your inexperience,’ he said, ‘but I will not tolerate your disobedience.

You will follow my orders without question, or I will behead you myself. Do you understand?’

Joel hesitated for one second. Then he drew the heavy *katana* from its scabbard.

21

Out of the bag

Penelope fed the punchcard into the machine. ‘Here I go!’ she shouted.

Nothing happened.

She restrained an oath. ‘I’ll try again,’ she said, plucking the punchcard out.

‘It’s the egg,’ said Mr Cwej. ‘There isn’t enough juice left in it.’

‘Egg? Juice?’ said Kame.

‘I think you’re right,’ said Penelope. She knelt by the machine and peered at the softly glowing device inside. ‘Its light is dying.’

‘Try again,’ said Mr Cwej. ‘We might get lucky.’

‘But will I have enough power to get back?’ Penelope sighed. ‘Hope

springs eternal in the human breast.' She pushed the card in once more.

There was a loud popping sound, and the light in the egg went out for good.

'Oh, no!' said Penelope.

Mr Cwej started walking towards her. 'What if we –'

'I think you had better stand back,' she said suddenly.

There was a bright flash, followed by a sudden warping ripple that twisted Penelope and the time conveyance into a pretzel, then a smear, then nothing.

The thunderous clap that followed made Kame press his hands to his ears in alarm.

'It's OK,' said Chris. 'She's on her way.'

They both glanced at the pod. 'He must have sent her,' said Chris. 'I think it – he – understands what we're trying to do.'

'What now?' said Kame.

'We get ready for a siege,' said Chris.

'It will be difficult,' said Kame. 'In the past this place has been protected by the steepness of the rocky mountain, and by its strong walls. But there has been little here worth fighting for. We have food for some weeks, but we can expect a rain of arrows and flame, men trying to scale the walls at all hours of the night and day. . . Without warriors, we cannot defend ourselves.'

Chris nodded. 'You're right. We'll just have to hope that the Doctor can get that pod open.'

'What will you do if it cannot be opened, and Gufuu-sama demands you give it to him?' said Kame.

Chris glanced at him. 'I haven't decided yet,' he said.

Joel stood in front of the Doctor with his sword in his hand.

Gufuu-sama and his samurai watched, calmly, waiting to see what the young barbarian was going to do. And Joel knew that they had cut him all the slack they were going to, and that if he didn't kill the Doctor, right here and now, he was going to die. Right here and now.

Kill. *The.* Doctor?

The one thing the Daleks had never done, the Cybermen had never done, the Zygons and the Kraal and the Autons had never done? The one thing that bullets and lasers and explosions and poison had never done? Joel Andrew Mintz, with a borrowed sword?

Joel made himself look at the Doctor.

The Doctor looked back with utter, utter calm. Not faked calm, meant to freak him out or defy his enemies. Real calm. No panic, no apprehension, no fear at all. Whatever happened happened.

God, I can't do this. I have to do this. If I don't do this, I'll die. The Doctor didn't have to come here; he didn't have to interfere; he knew they might kill him! If I don't use the sword, one of the samurai will, first on me, then on him we'll *both* die!

Joel raised his heavy sword, shaking with the exertion. The Doctor didn't react, just gazed up at him, waiting. Not trying to talk him out of it, not trying to hypnotize him. Just waiting.

Joel felt the sword leave his hands. It fell, point down, into the soil.

Joel flung himself on to his hands and knees before the daimyo and pushed his forehead into the dirt. 'Great lord,' he said, 'will you hear what I have to say?'

Gufuu-sama audibly sighed. 'What is it, Mintsu?'

Joel peeked up at the daimyo, whose *katana* was halfway out of its scabbard. He realized he was so frightened he wasn't even registering it any more.

'Lord,' he said, 'I know you value those who speak their minds honestly. Look at him!' He glanced towards the Doctor. 'We're about to kill him, and he isn't frightened at all!'

'He is brave,' said Gufuu-sama. 'Unlike certain people.'

'Listen to me, lord,' Joel raced on. 'I know a lot about this man, about

his adventures. He's clever. He always has a plan. He always knows more 194

about what's going on than his enemies know. He's calm because *he knows something we don't! '*

Gufuu-sama considered. 'Go on, Doctor,' breathed Joel. 'Tell them.' He pushed his face back into the dirt.

'It's true,' said the daimyo, 'that he shows uncommon calm in the face of certain death. But no matter what his plan, his execution can hardly help him!' Joel trembled as he heard the *katana* leave its scabbard. 'His cleverness is all the more reason to kill him. What do you say, Doctor?'

'Good morning, Miss Gate,' said the Doctor.

Joel looked up so fast his glasses nearly went flying. 'Oh my God,' he said.

Penelope was standing behind the daimyo, holding a smoking matchlock, the muzzle aimed right at the warlord's head. A mutant version of her time machine was standing on the ground, a foot from her.

The samurai with Gufuu reached for their swords. 'Don't,' said Penelope.

'You couldn't possibly kill me before I shoot him. I have only one bullet, so I will be sure to make it count.' She didn't take her eyes off Gufuu. 'Cut the Doctor free.'

'I think you had better do what she says, Mintsu,' said Gufuu mildly.

Joel wobbled to his feet and crouched beside the Doctor. He fumbled the short sword out of his belt and started sawing at the Time Lord's bonds.

'Do hurry up, Joel,' said Penelope.

'I'm doing the best I can,' squeaked Joel. 'There!'

The Doctor stood up, rubbing his wrists to get the circulation going again.

'Come over here, Doctor,' said Penelope.

The Doctor went and stood on the other side of the time machine. ‘Er,’ said Joel.

‘I think you had better accompany us, Mr Mintz,’ said Penelope.

The three time travellers made a rough landing in the monastery courtyard, right next to the pod.

The monks were quietly standing, watching, the Roshi and Chris at the front of the small crowd.

‘Welcome back,’ said Chris quietly.

The Doctor went up to him and put a hand on his arm. ‘Chris –’

‘Sorry about burying you,’ said the young man. ‘We couldn’t carry you, and I didn’t want the samurai having a go at you. They were cutting off the heads of corpses.’

‘Not to worry,’ said the Doctor brightly. ‘Now I know how a sprout feels.

What’s the situation?’

‘The pod contains a Kapteynian psychokinetic in cryosleep,’ said Chris. ‘The supercooling has had a superconductive effect on his brain.’

‘Oh, super,’ muttered Joel.

The Doctor knelt beside the pod, running a hand along its surface. ‘His power would have been suddenly, massively amplified. No wonder the effects have been so unpredictable – there’s no way he could keep it under control.’

‘Doctor,’ said Penelope, ‘his perceptions are confused – they are similar to my own when I was engaged in my hyperwalk.’

‘He sees in four dimensions.

‘Or more. It was a jumble, terrifying and incomprehensible.’

‘Of course! That’s why he brought you and Joel here. He must have thought you were passing space travellers – he mistook the future for a nearby planet, Penelope’s machine for a hyperdrive.’

‘Oh yeah!’ said Joel. ‘And my little trip through time as a transporter, or something. . . ’

The Doctor nodded. ‘And when he couldn’t bring Joel all the way back to now, he sent Penelope’s machine forward. Once he found something that worked, he tried it over and over. Dragging you back in time, healing Kame’s wounds.’

‘We must get him out of there at once,’ said Penelope.

‘The Kapteynians don’t have the technical skill,’ said Chris. ‘It could be dangerous to open the pod incorrectly. We were hoping you could think of something.’

The Doctor nodded, examining the control panel which Talker had opened.

‘I wish there was time for a bath,’ he said, ‘but Gufuu-sama will be making all speed here. How are we set for a siege?’

‘Well,’ said Chris, ‘we’re not, really. If Gufuu really wants to break in, he’ll break in.’

‘Right,’ said the Doctor. ‘Our only hope now is to –’

‘You will not hand Psychokinetic over to them!’ squawked Talker.

‘– open the pod,’ finished the Doctor. ‘And as quickly as possible. Once Gufuu gets inside the walls, it will be out of our hands.’

‘That’s why I sent Penelope to fetch you,’ agreed Chris. ‘You work on it –

Talker can help.’ The Doctor nodded. ‘I’ll make sure no one gets hurt. What do I need to know about Gufuu’s army?’

‘Joel can tell you,’ said the Doctor, without looking up from his work.

Chris looked over at Joel, who was still standing beside the time conveyance, looking bewildered. ‘Welcome back,’ he said.

Joel burst into tears.

* * *

Gufuu stared up at the walls of the monastery. They were earth embankments, faced with stones, like castle walls. They had kept this monastery safe for decades. Today, they would be breached for the first time.

Or tomorrow. Or the day after. The monks were not armed, and there was no urgency. The pod would soon be his.

Gufuu looked around at his troops: thirty men and six of his captains. One of the samurai was examining the demon woman's musket, keeping it carefully pointed away from the others in case he discovered its secret. The rest had been sent to mop up the remains of Umemi's army – a meandering rabble, now they were leaderless – and to begin the push into his old rival's territory.

Gufuu-sama stroked his chin, considering. It would be wise to send some scouts in case the reputed secret entrance could be found, though they probably wouldn't need to use it. No, the best way was simply to construct a few ladders and climb over the top. He didn't expect much resistance. If all went well, the pod could be his by lunchtime.

There was a sound like metal being torn with someone's bare hands. Gufuu flinched, instinctively, raising an armoured hand to protect his face. Dust and tiny pieces of rock and soil rained down on him.

He risked opening his eyes, and started slapping the dust from his armour.

The samurai with the strange musket was looking from the weapon to the hole he had just blown in the monastery wall and back again, astonished.

'Well done,' said Gufuu lightly, brushing soil from his breastplate.

The explosion didn't even make the Doctor flinch. Chris had run back from the wall, brushing dust and chips of stone from his hair.

'They're through!' he shouted. 'We're out of time, right now!'

Penelope and Talker stared towards the smoke, holding their guns, knowing they would be useless against the army outside.

'Did I ever tell you,' said the Doctor, around a mouthful of half-stripped copper wire, 'about lkkyu and the teacup?'

‘No,’ said Chris. Joel knelt down in the dust beside him. Their eyes were fixed on the Doctor’s hands, moving slowly and surely over the machinery.

Chris realized he was patting Joel’s arm, like a vet calming a dog that’s about to be put down. He wasn’t even scared. They were doomed.

‘Ikkyu was a Zen master,’ said the Doctor. He poked the primitive electric wire into the pod. ‘The teacup incident happened when he was just a boy.

Screwdriver.’

Penelope handed him the tool. They could hear shouts in the distance, the sound of rocks falling. ‘His Roshi had a valuable antique teacup. It would have been the kind they use in the tea ceremony, an ancient, simple piece with all its imperfections preserved. Paperclip.’

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Joel spotted a paperclip amongst the stuff from the Doctor’s jacket pockets, and passed it over. The Doctor went on, ‘One day, Ikkyu accidentally broke the teacup – just as his teacher was coming back into the room. He snatched up the broken pieces of the cup and hid them behind his back, thinking fast.’

Chris was staring towards the wall. Figures scrambled through the narrow breach, kicking the shattered stones aside. He felt so calm.

‘When the Roshi appeared, Ikkyu asked, “Master, why must people die?”’

The Doctor glanced back at Penelope’s time machine, frowned, and pushed a hand deep into the pod’s workings. ‘The Roshi answered, “Everything has to die, and has only a certain amount of time to live.” Does anyone have a piece of chewing gum?’

They looked at one another. ‘How about this?’ said Joel, picking up a fluff-covered toffee from the pile.

The Doctor took it and pushed it into place, somewhere inside the pod.

‘Ikkyu took his hands from behind his back and smiled, showing the Roshi the pieces of his cup.’

Gufuu-sama was striding up, hand on the hilt of his *katana*, followed by a dozen samurai. Chris, Joel, Penelope and Talker all watched the warlord as he came towards them. The Doctor didn't look up from his work. '"Master,"

said Ikkyu, "it was time for your cup to die."'

There was an almighty hiss and a puff of bitter cold. As one, the five of them jumped back from the pod as a steaming rectangular crack appeared in the surface, like a hidden door suddenly revealing itself.

'Suddenly,' breathed Joel, 'the lid fell off.'

22

Kami Chameleon

Gufuu-sama watched with furious calm as the lid of the pod lifted and swung open. Great clouds of bitter-smelling stem were billowing out, freezing cold.

'Is it dangerous!' Chris shouted over the sound of rushing vapours.

'No,' said the Doctor. 'If my improvisations work correctly, the coolant pumps will gradually equalize the internal and external temperatures.'

'And if they don't work correctly?' said Joel.

'The pod will become an instant heat sink and snap-freeze everything within a mile radius,' he said. 'I hope that toffee holds.'

The white clouds were already starting to diminish, rolling away across the ground, driving dust and dirt before them. The Doctor inched closer to the pod, an arm raised to protect his face from the frost, trying to see inside the machine.

Gufuu had held his ground, the white clouds boiling around his ankles. His retainers had backed away, but only a little.

The Doctor regarded the warlord for a moment, as if trying to read his intentions, or perhaps daring him to act. They stood there, everyone staring at the two of them.

Then the Doctor reached down into the gap in the pod. A moment later, he was pulling his arm back, and everyone gasped as they saw a

black, feathered hand gripping his wrist.

Talker rushed forward and helped the Doctor to haul Psychokinetic's shivering form out of the pod. The skinny Kapteynian was naked, his feathers slick and sticky with cryogenic fluid.

He opened his beak, but no sound came out. He made a strangling, cough-ing noise.

'Don't try to speak,' said Talker. 'That's my job, Talker, hey.'

'Thank,' coughed Psychokinetic. He was limp, his hands touching them, unable to grip. 'Thank you.'

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Gufuu was still watching, impassive. The Doctor said, 'You're welcome to the empty pod. Although I'm afraid it no longer has its mysterious abilities. All of its "miracles" were caused by this poor creature's attempts to get someone's attention, or to protect himself.' He rapped a knuckle against the cold metal shell of the pod. 'Now he's free, and he can't be put back inside, believe me –

it's just a lump of metal.' He bowed to the daimyo. 'It's all yours. If you want it.'

They were all looking at the warlord – all the monks, the time travellers, the aliens. He had come all this way, fought so hard, lost an army for nothing.

His hand was on the hilt of his sword. In a moment, he would pluck out the shining steel, and the slaughter would begin.

Except, of course, that the superior warrior knows when not to fight.

Gufuu-sama pushed the sword back down into its scabbard. Joel noticeably jumped at the sound.

Without a word, the warlord turned and walked away. The samurai parted around him. A moment later, bewildered, they followed.

The Doctor watched until they had all squeezed back out through the breach in the wall. Cold dust was settling around the pod as its hissing fell away into silence.

He turned. Now everyone was looking at him, their eyes huge, astonished that they were still alive.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘I’m off to the bath.’

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23

Life in linear time

In the garden, in the tea hut, by the smoking firepit, the Doctor and Kadoguchi-roshi sat together. The old Zen master had carefully laid out the implements for the tea ceremony: the kettle, the bamboo water scoop, the whisk.

The Doctor listened to the sighing of the steam as the Roshi gently brought the water to the boil. After a while, the old monk picked up the remaining cup from his ancient set, used a bamboo spoon to put in just the right amount of tea, and ladled the boiling water over it. The Doctor watched silently as the monk whisked the tea up into a froth. The Roshi put the cup down in front of him.

The Doctor held the precious cup in both hands, carefully. He shut his eyes and breathed in the steam. When he opened them again, the Roshi was giving him a questioning look.

He dropped the tea cup, and it broke into a hundred pieces.

The Roshi smiled.

A team of monks was working on the gap in the monastery’s defences. Already the rubble of the wall had been sorted into neat piles, and the bits of stone too small to be re-used were being carried away.

Chris watched them work. He’d helped for a while, but he’d felt like an Ogron, clumping about. The monks moved simply and precisely, completely concentrated on what they were doing. Focused in the here and now.

A few days ago, being useless would have bothered him terribly, but now he was content to watch. He had done something impossible. He had managed without the Doctor. He had been wobbly with exhaustion and grief, but he had *managed*. He wasn’t useless. He wasn’t worthless. He had helped save everyone.

Maybe, just maybe, just a little bit, he was even worth dying for.

Someone thought so, once.

Joel and Penelope, and the Kapteynians, were still amazed that Gufuu hadn't chopped everyone into mincemeat, monks and all. But Chris under-stood why the daimyo had simply walked away. Lose your cool, and lose face.

His samurai would never have forgotten.

The monks' slow dance made him think of Chiyono and her broom. He wished she could have waited a little longer, just a few more days, but the Roshi had said she had collapsed soon after their departure for Hekison village. She had passed away quietly in the infirmary without regaining consciousness.

He hoped she was in Heaven, or Nirvana, or wherever, with Liz and Roz and (maybe) Kat'lanna and everybody they'd lost. He could see the Doctor talking to Joel, over on the veranda of the main hall. Chris hurried over.

'You can't,' Joel was saying.

'I can,' said the Doctor.

'Oh no. Oh my God. You can't.'

Joel slid quietly from a standing position to become a small, frightened pile.

The Doctor stood, looking down at him, his face still. 'Doctor. . . ' said Chris, but they both ignored him.

Joel said, 'You can't leave me here. It's as good as a death sentence. I can't survive here.' He looked up at the Doctor, blindly. 'Can't you at least leave me my things? My PowerBook and my watch and things?'

'Of course not,' said the Doctor. 'I can't let you get up to any more mischief with history.'

'I will,' promised Joel fervently. 'You're messing up history just by leaving me here. What if I accidentally screw up the timelines?'

'You won't,' said the Doctor. His voice was low and emotionless. 'I'm leaving you in the care of Kadoguchiroshi. He'll make sure you survive. You'll be fed and clothed. You'll work very hard and you'll meditate and study. After a few years of boiled rice and the Lotus

Sutra, I think you'll have learnt your lesson.'

'I thought I was supposed to have learnt my lesson already,' said Joel dully.

'You know I could never have killed you. You're just doing this to get back at me.'

'Listen to me, Joel Andrew Mintz,' said the Doctor sternly. 'You knowingly and willingly travelled through time with the intention of altering history.

You told yourself that you would only change history in "good" ways. But you found yourself caught up in the violence of a period and place you knew almost nothing about. In your ignorance and desperation, who knows what harm you might have done?'

'But I wasn't going to change history!' protested Joel. 'I was only going to make a few things better, just do a little bit of good – just like you!'

'This isn't a hobby! You can't just go handing computers over to feudal lords at the first hint of danger!' The Doctor scowled at him. 'And the worst of it is that you, of all people, ought to have known better.'

Joel listened to the whole speech, growing paler and paler. Finally he just bowed his head, pressing one hand to his face as though he wished he could disappear.

'Listen,' he murmured, desperately. 'Listen, do you want to know about your future? Because I've met you. Your next self. He said he was the eighth one.

I'll tell you all about it if you'll take me with you.' He looked up, pleadingly.

The Doctor shook his head and smiled.

'But don't you –'

'Don't imagine you can bargain with me, Joel Mintz. Poetic justice would see you as dead as the Caxtarid by this stage. Consider this a very light sentence.'

'You're right,' whispered the young man. His shoulders were

trembling.

‘You’re right. This is what I deserve. No one has the right to meddle with history, not even for the better. You ought to just leave me here. Trapped.

Trapped forever, with no way out.’

Chris looked at the Doctor. The Doctor sighed, looked at his pocket watch, checked the weather, scratched behind his ear, and said, ‘Oh, Fugue and Toc-cata. Get your things together, we’re leaving in an hour.’

Talker was hard at work in the monastery garden, chattering away with two of the villagers. Penelope watched as the bird’s slender fingers tenderly plucked a damaged plant from the soil and set it upright. Talker was back to being Gardener now.

Psychokinetic sat nearby, his feet tucked up under his scrawny body. A gaggle of children from the village were playing around him, patting him and combing his feathers with their fingers. He pecked at a bowl of rice from time to time. Gardener said he would soon recover, given copious quantities of food, sunlight and calm.

He looked up at Penelope as she walked up. ‘I know I keep saying this to everybody,’ he said, ‘but I’m sorry. I was panicking in there, and I –’

‘You are entirely forgiven,’ she insisted. The Doctor had made translators from the circuitry of the Caxtarid’s *drones*; she wore one pinned to her jacket.

‘I cannot imagine how you bore your imprisonment as well as you did.’

‘So much happened because of me,’ said the bird. ‘So much.’

‘The events of the last few days are the result of the Caxtarids’ cruelty and the daimyos’ greed,’ said Penelope, with certainty. ‘I think we should be thank-ful that their vices did not lead to a worse outcome.’

Gardener got up from the garden and joined them, preening her feathers and removing dirt. ‘I have concluded my negotiations,’ she told Penelope. ‘We will return to Hekison village and help rebuild it. And protect it, although the Doctor has insisted we abandon our

weapons and armour.'

'Quite rightly,' said Penelope. 'All of these events have been lost to Earth's history, and they must remain that way.' She looked up as Mr Cwej joined them, dodging giggling children. 'Speaking of history, Mr Cwej –'

'It's "Shvay",' he said. 'Not "Kwedge".' He smiled. 'Anyway, you can call me Chris.'

'I beg your pardon, Chris. What I meant to ask was whether history was not, in fact, altered. Would Gufuu and Umemi have had their battle if not for the pod?'

'The Doctor thinks so,' said Chris. 'He wants to doublecheck, but he thinks the battle probably just happened a few years earlier than it was going to.

In the end it won't matter – neither of the daimyo was going to end up running the country. Their districts will be taken over by Hideyoshi within three decades.'

Penelope glanced at the farmers, who were deep in a discussion of the vegetable garden. 'And these people? And the monks?'

Chris shrugged. 'The Doctor doesn't know. Peace is coming, at least. We'll have to look it all up in the TARDIS databanks when we get back.'

'Then you will not be leaving Mintsu-san in my care?' said Kadoguchi-roshi.

The old monk and the Doctor were walking through the monastery garden. The air was a little warmer than it had been. Soon the trees would be blossoming. 'The Admiral will keep an eye on him for me,' he said.

'But you insisted that his actions were a serious crime.'

'They were,' said the Doctor. 'But he's not a bit like that, really. He just got carried away.'

'What of Kuriisu-san?'

'Did he ever answer your *koan*?'

'Yes,' said Roshi, stopping at the well. 'I believe he did.'

The Doctor looked at the not-quite-random pattern of moss growing across the stones, the subtle shades of red and deep green. A tree was growing over the well, early flowers bursting into life on its branches.

'It was wrong of me to try to force him into a mould,' the Doctor said. 'I think I mistook his faith and optimism for naivety.' He sighed. 'All these years among you, and I still don't understand what's going on inside your minds.'

'The greatest masterpieces,' said Roshi, 'are created directly out of our own natures, when the busy, worrying, scheming mind is put aside for that single moment.' He nodded. 'Allow Kuriisu-san to continue to act out of his own 204

nature. And do not be deceived by changes in yourself, however dramatic.

Continue to act out of your own nature.'

The Doctor was silent for a long time. Loosened by the breeze, a blossom dropped from the tree. Roshi caught it. At last, the Doctor said, 'In spring's scenery, there is nothing superior or inferior. Some branches grow short, some long.'

Roshi smiled, and handed the Doctor the flower.

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Room for living

It took them the best part of a day to reach the TARDIS, the Doctor wandering up the rocky mountainside without so much as breaking into a sweat, Penelope clambering over rocks and fallen trees with the same vigour and determination as had brought her safely home from Africa. Joel puffed and wheezed and required numerous rest breaks. He stayed quiet, partly because he was out of breath and partly because he didn't want to push his luck.

It would have been easier, he reflected, if they hadn't made him carry Penelope's time machine.

When they reached the Castle, it was almost night. There had been a late snowfall this high in the mountains, hiding the shrivelled plants and the fetid pools. The Castle grounds almost looked peaceful.

Penelope was gazing at the blue oblong of the TARDIS, unimpressed, while Joel looked around at the withered trees and the burnt building.

'Right,' said the Doctor, rubbing his hands together. 'First stop, 1996, where I'm going to have a little chat with Admiral Summerfield before I let you out.' He gave Joel a stem, teacherly look. 'You're on probation. Any further foolishness and it'll be boiled rice and pickled vegetables. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Doctor,' said Joel.

'Good. Second stop, 1883.'

'It does not look particularly comfortable,' said Penelope. She brushed her fingers across the pseudoflaking blue paint. 'I assume this is some variety of disguise, though it seems inappropriate for this period. . . '

The Doctor extracted the TARDIS key from his hat. 'You did insist on seeing my time conveyance,' he said.

'I had expected something more awesome,' she teased.

'Ah well,' said the Doctor. 'You can't always get what you want.'

Joel laughed, somewhere behind them. The Doctor shot him a look, and the laughter faded into a grin. The Doctor put a finger to his lips and opened the TARDIS door. 'Do come in,' he said.

Penelope gave him a suspicious look, and went inside.

The Doctor and Joel waited outside. After a couple of minutes, the Doctor took out his pocket watch and opened it. Joel tried to peek at the odd workings, but the Time Lord quietly closed the watch before he could see it.

Another couple of minutes passed. Joel glanced at the Doctor. 'She's probably worked out how to fly it by now.'

'Hmm.' The Doctor pushed open the door. Before Joel could follow him in, he held up a finger. 'Wait here,' he said.

Joel stood outside the time vessel, nervously hoping it wouldn't suddenly leave without him. After another minute, he couldn't stand it any longer.

Somehow, the size difference didn't bother him at all. He'd heard too many descriptions. He took in the clinical whiteness of the place, the primitive-looking controls of the central console, the hum that filled the cool, flavourless air.

Penelope was standing before the console, tears pouring down her face.

The Doctor was standing nearby, holding a chair, looking as though he only half knew what to do.

Joel just watched the odd tableau for a minute or two, Penelope crying silently, the Doctor holding the chair an inch off the ground and looking hope-lessly lost.

Joel took the chair out of the Time Lord's hands. The Doctor shook himself, suddenly, putting a hand on the console and watching as Joel positioned the chair behind Penelope. He took her hand and lowered her into the seat.

The Doctor fished through his pockets, discarding three handkerchiefs before he found an unsullied one, and passed it to her. She blew her nose, loudly, and waved the hanky around, speechless.

'Forgive me,' began the Doctor gruffly, 'if –'

'There is nothing to forgive,' announced Penelope. She blew her nose again, and said more clearly, 'I could not have conceived of any machine so, so. . .

Doctor, you – or rather, those responsible for this craft's construction – have not only conquered the dimensions, but are advanced far beyond my capacity to comprehend. For any human being to comprehend.'

'Oh, come on,' said Joel. 'It looks like you built it from a kit.' He reached out to touch one of the low-tech controls, but the Doctor slapped his fingers away. Joel decided not to say anything more, loath to find himself floating home, but he couldn't get the grin off his face.

Penelope had sprung up from the chair and was pacing around the console, peering at everything, careful not to touch any of the controls. 'How is the internal dimensional configuration maintained?' she wondered. 'For that matter, how many spatial dimensions are involved in the displacement process? Are there limits to the temporal distance that can be covered in a single 208

transit?'

The Doctor shook his head. 'You're worse than Albert,' he said. He patted the console, reassuringly. 'All right, old girl. Let's take this lady inventor – and this ungrateful fanboy – for a spin.'

He winked at them, and they grinned back like a couple of kids.

Kame raised the sake flask and waved it vaguely at Chris, who was a comfortable pile against one wall of the inn. The Adjudicator held out his cup, and somehow, with considerable effort by the two of them, it was filled again.

'I must enjoy this while I can,' said Kame. 'Very soon, Kuriisu-san, it will be a steady diet of rice and tea for this weary warrior.'

'I really expected you to head back to Hekison with everybody,' said Chris.

'You enjoyed all that fighting. Coming back to life all the time. Like a video-game hero!'

Kame wondered vaguely what he was talking about. 'The thing, young Kuriisu-san, is that now that Kannon is no longer Kannon – and I do not pretend to fully understand all that has occurred – but the thing is that, the next time I die, I will not return.'

He put a hand to his breast. 'At my age, Kuriisu-san, it is time to reconsider one's life. For many years I have lived as best I could by *bushido*, the strict code of the warrior. Now it is time I went beyond that and attempted to penetrate the truth of reality.' He swallowed his sake. 'If I fail to achieve enlightenment this evening, I shall turn myself over to the tender mercies of Kadoguchi-roshi.'

'Hair of the dog, eh?' Chris grinned. 'I'll drink to that!' He leant over the smoky firepit, and dropped a crumpled piece of paper into it. The flames flared up for an instant, and the paper was gone.

'And you, Kuriisu-san?' Kame glanced around at the rabble in the inn. They had walked a long way into town, and he wanted to be sure they got back to the monastery with their skins and their purses intact. 'What of your quest to discover what lies beyond death? I doubt my poor descriptions have left you any the wiser.'

'Oh,' said Chris, waving his cup around and splashing sake down his sleeve,

‘I’m not worried about any of that any more. It’s all resolved. I have been,’ he pronounced carefully, ‘de-angsted.’

Kame nodded. ‘You struck me as more of a straightforward, courageous fellow than a philosopher.’

‘Oh. Thanks. Hey?’

‘This “original nature” of which Roshi has spoken. . . it is not studying sutras or debating points of scripture. It is behaving purely and simply as oneself It is only when you stop to worry that you become burdened, unable to act.’

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‘That’s deep.’ Kame bowed. Chris raised his sake cup. ‘Here’s half a cat in your eye.’

So Christopher Cwej went up the mountain in the morning, squinting in the sunlight glinting off the fresh snow. He carried nothing with him. He thought about nothing as he climbed up towards the Castle, just looked at the snow and the trees and the leaves and stones, and smiled to himself from time to time.

The TARDIS wasn’t back yet. There was a square indentation in the snow, freshly dusted by last night’s small fall. Chris sat down beside it, on a fallen beam.

The shrine, the single carved stone meant to lock in the spirit of the vampire, was gone. Chris suspected it was somewhere about the place, probably in little pieces, but he didn’t go looking for it.

He checked again, looking into the unhappy place inside himself where Liz had been living all this time. But now, when he reached for those feelings, they were gone. It really was all resolved.

Even the weird dreams would probably stop now.

He started to whistle.

The Doctor stood with his hands resting lightly on the console as the materi-alization routine began. For a moment he thought about nothing at all, just listening to the grinding sound of the TARDIS landing as though it was music, letting his head become completely empty and be filled by that old, familiar, meaningless sound.

Then all of the thoughts and plans and memories came flooding back in.

For a moment, the Doctor felt as though his brain was too small to hold it all, as though something was going to start flowing over the top of his mind and dribble down the sides of his head.

Wouldn't it be nice, he thought for a moment, amidst the jumbled shouting in his skull, to be a plum blossom, and just bloom without a thought?

There was the usual clunk as the TARDIS finished landing. The Doctor pulled his thoughts together and opened the doors.

A snowball hit him squarely in the face.

He yelled and knocked the powdery snow away. Another snowball sailed past as he stormed out of the door.

Chris was peeping up from behind a snow fortress. 'Got you!' called the young man.

'Right,' said the Doctor. He ducked behind a tree and started rolling up a missile of his own.

* * *

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Psychokinetic sat by himself, wings and legs folded, watching the villagers pick through the remains of their homes.

The other Kapteynians were helping to lift beams and clear away ruined timber and thatching. Only three dwellings had survived the fire, though that was enough to house the survivors until new huts could be built. Mikeneko and Gardener were inspecting the damage to the crops, which was not as severe as they had first thought.

Psychokinetic pecked at the ground nervously, tasting soot, It was possible they might survive the damage he had done to them.

Gardener kept insisting that it wasn't his fault. Its memories of his time in the cryostasis pod were sharp as crystal. From his point of view, it had been years of confinement. Years of panic. His powers lashing out erratically, sometimes sensing his environment, sometimes desperately trying to interact with it.

And he couldn't even help them. Gardener insisted he do nothing until he recovered his health – no one knew what strange side effects his time in the pod may have had. And, now he was out of the supercooled environment, his psychokinetic ability was barely enough to lift a worm, let alone shift charred beams and ruined *tatami*.

He closed his eyes, slowly becoming aware of the movement around him.

Felt the mass of the timber, the strength of the humans' muscles, acceleration, gravity, velocity, force. It was a pale awareness after the cold intensity of the pod.

He did not see the beam that began to fall from the front of one of the ruined houses. He felt it, felt it come loose and willingly jump into gravity's arms, oblivious of the fragile creatures that were beneath it.

Psychokinetic opened his eyes. The humans were shouting in surprise and then in relief, two of them cowering under the beam he was holding up.

A beam that weighed as much as three Kapteynians.

'You'd better get out from under there,' he said shakily, 'because I think I'm going to faint.'

Chris and the Doctor were pushing a massive snowball along the ground.

'That's enough,' Chris decided. 'Now for stage two.'

They made the second tier by rolling up a smaller ball and slapping stinging-cold handfuls of snow on to it, until it formed a lumpy sphere, about the right size.

'Got some questions for you,' said Chris, as they gingerly lifted the second snowball into place.

Chris's look was thoughtful, but it wasn't the faintly worried, puzzled look he'd worn for too long. 'Fire away,' said the Doctor, feeling himself relax.

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'OK. Firstly, why didn't you get Joel to tell you what wow, this sounds weird – about the eighth Doctor?'

The seventh Doctor smiled, patting the snowball into shape. ‘I don’t want to know,’ he said. ‘I really don’t. I’m not going to try to plan for it, live in constant anticipation.’

‘Kame calls that dying isagi-yoku,’ said Chris. ‘Without reluctance or hesita-tion.’

‘When it happens, it happens.’ The Doctor shrugged. ‘Death’s the one door you can’t close.’

‘Which brings us to the other thing,’ the young man said shyly. ‘You see, after I passed my last Adjudicator exam and joined the force, I had to fill out this huge form, and one of the questions was about next of kin. In case I was killed in the line of duty.’

‘Don’t worry,’ said the Doctor. ‘If anything ever happens to you, I’ll make sure your family is all right.’

‘Actually,’ said Chris, ‘I was thinking about you.’

‘I think we can make the head just by packing on handfuls,’ said the Doctor.

He rolled a small snowball and patted it down into place. ‘Like this.’

Chris frowned, but started scooping up snow.

‘Anyway,’ said the Doctor, ‘I see I completely failed to teach you anything about manipulation.’

Chris laughed. ‘I did con Psychokinetic into contacting Penelope, though.’

‘Oh yes. Penelope told me about the “explosive”. Very clever.’

Chris had a pocketful of small stones. Now he gave the snowman a crooked smile and two beady eyes. The Doctor found a pair of fallen branches and pushed them into the snowman where his arms ought to be.

‘Is Penelope going to be OK?’

‘Oh, yes. I’m sure she will – fight for her divorce, go on working. The real shame is that she won’t ever have the recognition she deserves.’

‘At least she won’t have to worry about any more weird dreams. The Room With No Doors. Poor old Psychokinetic, locked away. . . ’ Chris

met the Doctor's eyes. 'Nobody deserves that.'

'You're right.' The Doctor clasped Chris's arm. 'No one does.'

Chris nodded. He waved his arm at the snowman as though it were a work of art. Its irregular, noseless face beamed back at them. 'Well, what do you think?'

'Nine out of ten, Chris,' said the Doctor.

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Thanks to:

Rebecca Levene and Peter Darvill-Evans, Andy Bodle and all at Virgin for all these years.

Rebecca J. Anderson, for her kind permission to quote from *Sacrifice*.

Jeff Beuck, for the 'Superb' rating. :-)

Jon Blum, for writing the Doctor's subterranean thoughts, and continuing to be full of clever insights. :-x

Dave Halfpenny, Craig A. Reed, Jr, and Kyla Ward, who know about samurai and such things.

Jim Mortimore, Lance Parkin and Marc Platt, for Useful Discussions.

Geoffrey Weasel for the Japanese translations – *arigatou!*

The readthrough crew: Todd Beilby, Jon Blum, Aaron Brockbank, Steven Caldwell, David Carroll, Stephen Groenewegen, James Sellwood, Kyla Ward and Grant Wittingham.

And to everyone else who helped in any way!

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Cover design: Slatter-Anderson
Cover painting: Jon Sullivan

ISBN 0-426-20500-6

UK: £4.99 USA: $5.95
CANADA: $7.99
*AUSTRALIA: $10.95
*RECOMMENDED PRICE

Science fiction/TV tie-in

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